Transition from Special Education to **Inclusive** Education **Systems**

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

ADHD Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

APS Additional professional support

ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder

CIRCLE The Child Inclusion: Research into Curriculum, Learning and Education (CIRCLE) Collaboration

CLB *Consultatieve Leerling Begeleiding* (Consultative Student Guidance)

EASNIE European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

EASPD European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities

ECSR European Committee of Social Rights

ECTS European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

Erickson Edizioni Centro Studi Erickson (Italy)

EU European Union

HSE Health Service Executive (Ireland)

IC Sovere Istituto Comprensivo "Daniele Spada" in Sovere (Italy)

ICF International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health

IEP Individual Education Plan

NCSE National Council for Special Education (Ireland)

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OT Occupational Therapist

PBIS Positive Behaviour and Intervention Support System

PBIS Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports

PT *Pôles territoriaux* (Territorial Poles)

R&D Research and Development

RCI Resource Centre for Inclusion

ReBUZ *Regionale Beratungs- und Unterstützungszentren* (Regional Advice and Support Centres)

SEN Special Educational Needs

SIM School Inclusion Model

SLT Speech and Language Therapist

SNA Special Needs Assistant

SWPBS School-wide Positive Behaviour Support

SWV Samenwerkingsverband (Partnership)

TPL Teacher Professional Learning

UN CRPD United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

WHO World Health Organization

ZFP *Zentrum für Förderpädagogik* (Centre for Special Education)

ZuP *Zentrum für unterstützende Pädagogik* (Supportive Education Centre)

Glossary

Special educational needs (SEN) — A term used in some countries to refer to children with disabilities or developmental delays that are seen as requiring additional support in the education process. Definitions of SEN differ in each country, yet it can include children having physical or mental disabilities, as well as cognition or educational delays. SEN can also be called 'additional learning needs' in some countries.

Exclusion — A situation whereby students with SEN/disabilities are denied access to education in any form.

Segregation — Provision of education to students with SEN/disabilities in separate environments, and in isolation from students without disabilities.

Integration — Placement of students with SEN/disabilities in mainstream educational institutions without adaptation and requiring the student to fit in.

Inclusive education — Education environments that adapt the design and physical structures, teaching methods, and curriculum as well as the culture, policy and practice of education environments to make them accessible to all students without discrimination.

Special education / special needs education / specialised settings — Separate schools, classes, or instruction specifically designed for students categorised as having special educational needs (SEN).

Mainstream education / mainstream settings — General educational settings or regular schools, attended by students with 'typical' development and, potentially, students with SEN/disabilities.

Introduction

Even though people with disabilities and special education needs (SEN) have a fundamental right to mainstream education under Article 24 of the UN CRPD, finding a school with a good inclusive education practice is still not easy across Europe. Among other barriers, the continuation of two simultaneous education systems hinders the development of one inclusive education system for children of all abilities. While more children with SEN attend mainstream institutions nowadays, those with greater support needs are still largely excluded from inclusive education.[1] In fact, in some countries, the number of pupils in special schools or classrooms has increased in recent years.[2] Moreover, even when access to mainstream schools for students with SEN is guaranteed, educators often feel that they are left without the knowledge, tools and support necessary to meet the needs of a diverse number of learners in their classroom.[3]

One approach to promoting inclusion is the transfer of knowledge between various institutions and actors. For instance, knowledge can be created and shared between professionals who work in the special education and mainstream education systems: various stakeholders across Europe have been advocating for a change in the role of the special school, moving from the traditional provider of segregated education towards a partner and a resource centre for mainstream schools.[4] The transfer of knowledge to support inclusive education can be facilitated through a variety of policies and practices, which are the focus of this study. We consider the following as the main objectives of this study:

··· Identify and disseminate practices and policies that contribute to the practical transition towards inclusive education systems in various European countries and can be inspirational models for other countries.
··· Identify the key success factors in the transfer of knowledge to support the transition from special education to inclusive education;
··· Provide recommendations to European institutions, national- and local-level policymakers, as well as support organisers, including education, social, and healthcare institutions, on how to promote the transition towards inclusive education systems.

Scope

The study focuses on a collection of promising practices and policies for the transfer of knowledge to support the transition from special education to inclusive education. These policies and practices are related to the formal education system and are collected from countries within the Council of Europe. We selected the cases on the basis of existence of promising practices, ensuring variety in terms of regions of Europe, EU membership status, welfare regimes, economic development.

The selected cases focus on policies and practices in Finland, Italy, Portugal, Lithuania, Germany (Bremen), Belgium (French and German-speaking communities), Ireland, UK (Scotland), Slovenia, the Netherlands, and Serbia (see Figure 1 below). The selection also ensures variety in terms of progress in inclusive education, including countries that are considered forerunners (Italy, Portugal, Finland); those that are generally lagging behind but nonetheless have local or regional level authorities that are working to address existing issues (such as the French and German-speaking communities in Belgium, Hoeksche Waard municipality in the Netherlands, Bremen in Germany); are

[1] EASPD. 2021. *Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries. 2020 Summary Report*, p. 34. Available: https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/projekte/fzib/FZIB_Pdfs/EASPD_Barometer_report_2020_FINAL.pdf

[2] For example, Department for Education. 2023. *Special educational needs in England*. Available: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2021-22; Euridyce. 2023. *Ireland national education system*. Available: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/ireland/142

[3] EASPD. 2021. p. 19.

[4] Baker, J. 2007. "The British Government's strategy for SEN: implications for the role and future development of special schools". *Support for Learning,* 22: pp. 72-77. Available: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9604.2007.00450.x; Leijen, Ä., Arcidiacono, F., Baucal, A. 2021. "The Dilemma of Inclusive Education: Inclusion for Some or Inclusion for All". *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. Available: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.633066

undergoing promising reforms (Lithuania, Serbia); or run unique innovative projects (Ireland, Scotland). Including a variety of countries at different stages of economic development and progress in inclusive education allows to showcase the fact that inclusive education is a goal that all countries have the potential to strive for. The selected cases illustrate that a lack of generalised political will or abundant funding do not necessarily prevent the development of inclusive education.

Figure 1. *Map of European countries covered in the report*
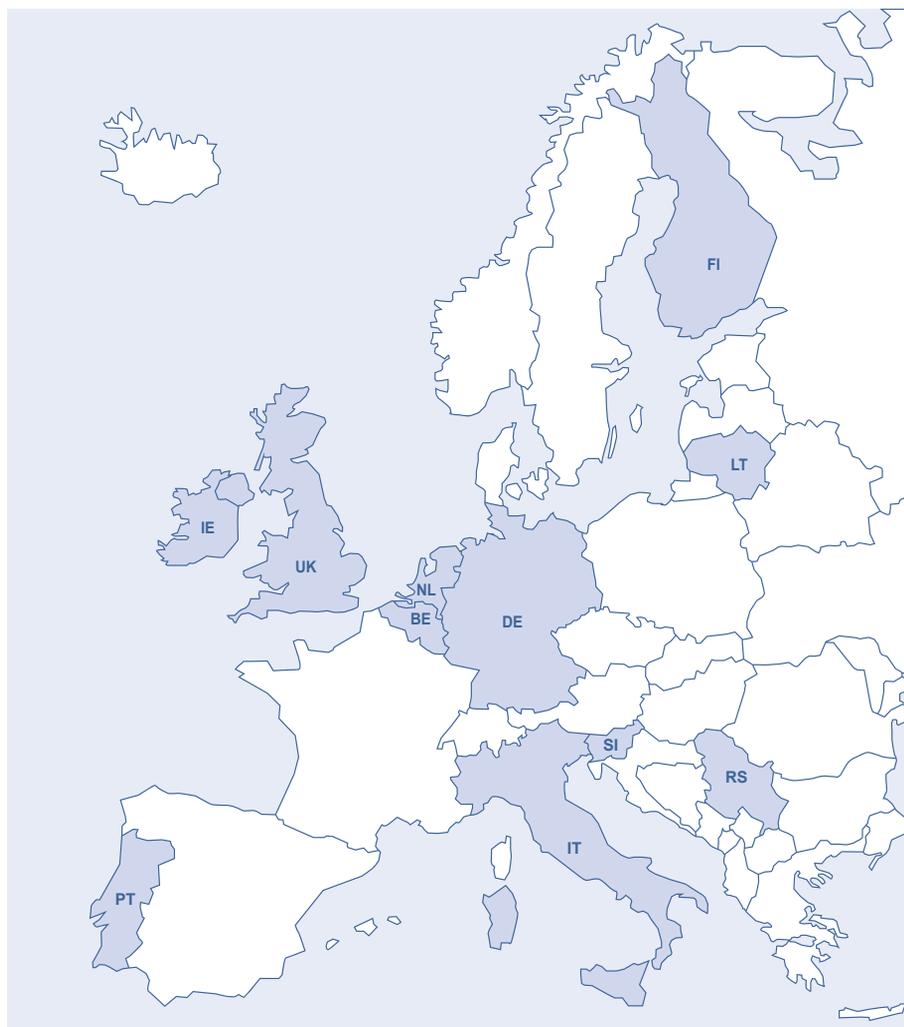
Source: developed by the authors

The transfer of knowledge can be facilitated in different ways, which can be categorised as follows:

Direct transmission — Collaborations between educational institutions (e.g., special and mainstream schools) or professionals (e.g., special education teachers and mainstream teachers within the same school).

Intermediated transmission — External institutions or organisations (e.g., service providers, institutes, training centres) providing knowledge to education professionals or facilitating dialogue.

Platforms — Knowledge sharing platforms, document repositories, databases, forums, online communities, etc.

Methodology and criteria for selecting promising policies and practices

The study follows a qualitative approach based on desk research, interviews and participatory methods (discussion with stakeholders to validate recommendations). 57 stakeholders were consulted during 48 online or written interviews, including policymakers and local/national-level authorities, education professionals and administrators at both special schools (resource centres) and mainstream schools, representatives of parent associations, experts/academics as well as support service providers in the field of education (see List of stakeholders consulted).

In consultation with the EASPD Member Forum on Education, the research team has established some criteria to assist them in selecting promising policies or practices to be included in this report. The selected initiatives had to meet some of the following criteria:

- Reflect the principles and values enshrined in the UN CRPD, the European Social Charter and other international conventions and treaties, as well as those stated in the EASPD 2021 Lisbon Declaration on Inclusive Education;
- Be inclusive (participatory) in practice/policy design and implementation (e.g., involving persons with disabilities, children with SEN and their families);
- Guarantee as complete an access as possible to the school curriculum and school community's activities for students with SEN;

- Centre on needs and not over-rely on diagnoses and labelling of students based on their disorders or disabilities;
- Pay attention to appropriate (mental) health support, anti-bullying, intersectionality & gender mainstreaming, as well as the digital transition;
- Have continuity and ability to exist in a self-sustaining way once one-off project-based funding ends;
- Demonstrate positive measurable impact (or at least potential for impact) in terms of inclusive education.

Report structure

The report is organised in the following structure:

- Section 1 describes 16 case studies on promising policies and practices on the transfer of knowledge to support the transition from special education to inclusive education;
- Section 2 identifies the common challenges (Chapter 1) to the transfer of knowledge to support the transition from special education to inclusive education, as well as details the key success factors for the transfer of knowledge (Chapter 2);
- Section 3 provides conclusions and recommendations stemming from the research, co-created and validated with relevant stakeholders.

Section 1. Promising policies and practices

The case studies presented in this chapter are meant to inspire other policymakers, support organisers and education practitioners to improve their own policies and practices in a variety of ways, categorised into a table below.

Table 1. *Thematic overview of case studies*

Activity area	Examples from selected promising policies and practices
Transforming special schools to focus on assistance to students in mainstream schools and fostering multidisciplinary collaboration	••• Introducing decisive reforms to eliminate segregated provision and fast-track inclusion (Portugal, Italy); ••• Applying conservative approaches, where special schools undergo step-by-step incremental changes and take up additional roles, such as assisting students in mainstream settings (Lithuania, Slovenia, Serbia, Belgium, the Netherlands). ••• Creating coordinating bodies that foster collaboration of different actors, involving special and mainstream education providers (*Pôles territoriaux* and ZFP in Belgium, ReBUZ in Bremen, Germany).
Building the school communities' competence and confidence	••• Researchers encouraging the adoption of evidence-based whole-school approaches (*ProKoulu* in Finland, CIRCLE in Scotland, Erickson in Italy); ••• Devising practice-oriented trainings and courses for teachers and other support organisers (knowledge centres in Finland, Italy, Lithuania; universities in Scotland, Italy; therapists training school communities in Ireland through visits); ••• Knowledge centres facilitating networks of schools and introducing mentorship and peer-learning among teachers and other support organisers (Serbia, Lithuania, Finland, Italy, Bremen in Germany, German and French communities in Belgium, Hoeksche Waard in the Netherlands).
Gathering and disseminating knowledge	••• Developing and promoting practice-oriented methodological resources for educators and support service providers (CIRCLE resources and the Inclusion Ambassadors in Scotland; publishing activities in Italy and Lithuania). ••• Collecting and disseminating knowledge and standardising practices accordingly among schools at a local level (Bremen in Germany, *Pôles territoriaux* and ZFP in Belgium).
Introducing operational models that effectively support learners' needs	••• Introducing multi-tiered additional learning support models that focus on needs rather than diagnosis (Finland, Ireland, Portugal); ••• Creating organisational structures that involve clear roles and multidisciplinary collaboration (Finland, Slovenia, Portugal, Serbia, Germany, German and French communities in Belgium); ••• Adopting innovative funding models that allow greater flexibility in allocating resources for support Portugal, Finland, Hoeksche Waard in the Netherlands). ••• Centering teaching activities on the lived experiences of students with disabilities as part of day-to-day life of the entire school community (IC Sovere in Italy; Inclusion Ambassadors in Scotland) ••• Creating procedures that allow students with disabilities to directly access support and request advise (Bremen in Germany)
Representing learners' and their families' voices in decision-making	••• Creating student bodies, consisting of pupils with additional support needs, to inform policymaking and school-level practices (Inclusion Ambassadors in Scotland); ••• Involving learners and their parents/caregivers in deciding their learning pathways (Portugal, Finland, Italy).

The chosen case studies have already showcased either a positive impact or the potential for having it. The policies and practical models of knowledge transfer outlined within these studies hold the potential for broader implementation and replication, as a whole or in part, in different contexts.

Finland's three-tiered support model to address students' needs

Country:
Finland

Scale:
National

Type:
Policy

Year implemented:
2011

Knowledge transfer:
Direct

At a glance:

By 2010, the share of special education referrals affected almost 9% of all pupils, half of whom were taught in segregated settings.

In 2011, the Finnish government introduced a new three-tiered (general, intensified, or special) support model, aiming to strengthen the pupil's right to early intervention and encouraging schools to try out alternative support methods before transferring students to specialised provision.

The organisation of support relies on municipalities and their local schools, rather than national authorities.

The reform increased the use of innovative inclusive teaching methods and multi-professional collaboration when addressing the needs of students; however, special classrooms remain commonplace in some municipalities.

transfer them to special classrooms within the school. Towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, almost 9% of all students in basic education (grades 1-9) were officially granted eligibility for special education, which was, in 46% of the cases, provided in segregated settings (mostly special classrooms)[6]. Municipalities had a lot of autonomy on how to deal with SEN – a student with a learning difficulty ended up in a full-time special education setting in one municipality, while a student with a similar difficulty in another municipality was given only part-time special needs education (which does not require an official decision[7]) or remedial teaching within the mainstream system.

Policymakers at local and national levels initiated a reform to decrease unnecessary decisions on eligibility for special education and to reinforce the importance of pedagogical assessment focused on needs rather than a diagnosis or available resources. Between 2008 and 2012, the Ministry of Education and Culture funded the development of a new model of support for students to better ensure their rights to inclusive education and equal opportunities. Over 270 municipalities participating in the initiative received funding of approximately EUR 45 million to develop this model in cooperation with higher education

Background

The number of special schools has been steadily decreasing since the 1990s in Finland.[5] Even though many pupils were integrated into mainstream schools, this did not necessarily mean inclusion *per se*. Schools often formally identified students as having special education needs (SEN) without trying out alternative support measures first. Identification of SEN allowed the schools to individualise the syllabi for the students, gain additional funding and resources and, potentially,

5   Statistics Finland. 2023. The number of special schools at the elementary school level was 195 in 2005 and reduced to 62 in 2022.

6   Statistics Finland. 2010. Cited from: Ström, K., and B. Hannus-Gullmets. 2015. "From Special (Class) Teacher to Special Educator – The Finnish Case." In Transitions in the Field of Special Education. Theoretical Perspectives and Implications for Practice, edited by D. L. Cameron and R. Thygesen, pp. 115–136. New York, NY: Waxmann.

7   Part-time special needs teaching is provided in connection with other instruction either simultaneously with other teaching, for small groups or as individual instruction. More information about part-time special education can be found at Savolainen, H. 2009. "Responding to diversity and striving for excellence: the case of Finland". Prospects, 39, pp. 281-292.

institutions[8]. Based on the initial results of this initiative, a nation-wide policy reform started in 2011[9]. The policy model has several promising features that can support the transition to more inclusive education systems in other countries.

Approach

According to an educational policy expert who contributed to the development of the reform, it had multiple goals:

- **To arrange pupil support in connection with mainstream teaching**. Transferring to specialised provision should be seen as a last resort only after attempting other forms of support (see Figure 1);
- To base the level of support on **pedagogical assessment focused on needs**, thus moving away from the medical model of disability;
- **To increase multi-professional cooperation** when deciding on the intensity and design of support needed for the pupil (including the classroom and special education teacher, the principal and pupil welfare professionals);
- To encourage schools and teachers **to use new pedagogical methods**, such as co-teaching, team-teaching, differentiation, flexible grouping, focus on learning environment, etc.;
- **To create equal opportunities** for students to get support in their local schools by developing a common support framework for all municipalities.

The framework was based on a **three-tiered support structure**,[10] according to which:

- All pupils are entitled to **general support (Tier 1, aimed at all students)** in their learning, which can include differentiated instruction, remedial teaching (when a regular classroom or special education teacher provides additional guidance to a child), small group teaching, co-teaching, etc. No documentation is needed to provide this support.
- **Intensified support (Tier 2, aimed at ~20% of students)** refers to more regular support or several forms of simultaneous support to prevent various behavioural or learning problems (e.g., in literacy or maths) from escalating. To request intensified support, the teacher drafts a pedagogical assessment. Then, a multi-professional pupil welfare team decides to provide intensified support (e.g., part-time special education).
- Only if the pupil does not respond to the intervention, **special support (Tier 3, aimed at ~5% of students)** can be provided. This level can include special education, e.g., individualised syllabi in one or all school subjects and other support measures according to the needs of the pupil. To enrol a child in special education, the teachers and the pupil welfare team and, if necessary, psychological, medical or social services, have to provide statements. Based on the decision of parents, opinions of students and experts, special support can be organised within a mainstream group, special group/class (full- or part-time), or a special school. Students with severe disabilities can access extended compulsory basic education (up to 11 instead of 9 years to complete 9 grades).

Furthermore, policymakers also changed the **national-level funding system for basic education.** Before 2010, the amount of government transfers to the municipalities (which organise education services) was tied to the number of pupils in that municipality. For children with SEN and disabilities, municipalities received 50-400% more funding than the basic amount (Law 635/1998). After the reform, the calculation formula became based on the overall number of compulsory-school-age residents in a municipality (Law 1705/2009). Under the new model, the national government allocates additional funding only for students in extended compulsory education (students with especially high levels of needs). The new formula removed the fiscal incentive for municipalities to refer

8   Thuneberg, H. et al. 2013. "Conceptual change in adopting the nationwide special education strategy in Finland". *Journal of Educational Change*, 15(1), pp. 37–56. Doi:10.1007/s10833-013-9213-x

9   The main policy documents in the reform were the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010); changes in the National Core Curriculum (2010)

10 Pulkkinen, J. & Jahnukainen, M. 2016. "Finnish reform of the funding and provision of special education: the views of principals and municipal education administrators". *Educational Review*, 68(2), pp. 171-188. Available: https://doi.org/10.1080/00 131911.2015.1060586; Rytivaara, A., Pulkkinen, J. & Palmu, I. 2021. "Learning about students in co-teaching teams". *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Doi:10.1080/13603116.2021.1878299

Figure 2. *Three-tiered support system in Finland*
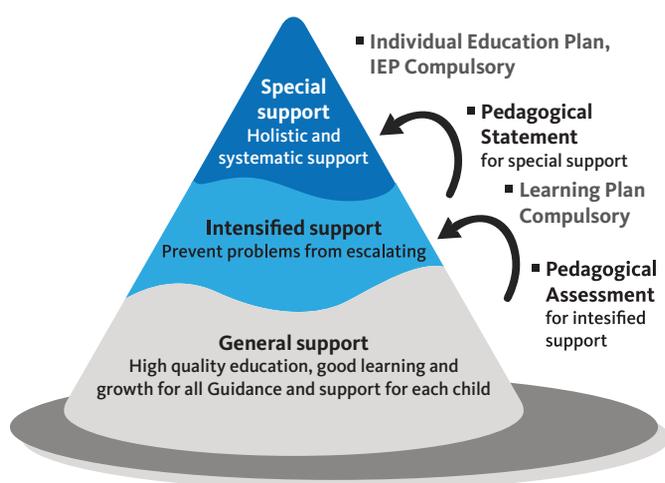
Source: Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting. Accessed from: Rytivaara, A., Pulkkinen, J. & Palmu, I. 2021. "Learning about students in co-teaching teams". International Journal of Inclusive Education. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2021.1878299

children to special education. However, municipalities can still have their own formulas to further distribute the funding between local schools[11].

Success factors

Interviewed stakeholders specify several aspects that positively affect the reform's implementation:

··· **Inclusion-oriented leadership and organisational structure of the school and municipality.** In Finland, the municipalities and the schools within them have a lot of autonomy on how to organise support activities for the pupils. The legislation only provides a three-tiered framework, but the actual organisation and resourcing of support depend on the local education professionals and administrators. For the three-tiered model to work well, the schools must have participatory structures, clear divisions of roles and a dialogue-driven working culture.

··· **The teachers' personal motivation, openness and pedagogical expertise.** After the reform, both the general and the special education teachers' role in decision-making for support has increased significantly. Interviewed experts notice that, under the new model, Finnish teachers are expected to

be open to, first of all, having another adult present in the classroom. Professional collaboration and consultation are required when planning support and evaluating the pupils' progress.

··· Related to the aspects above, **capacity-building for the support organisers** is important. The Finnish National Agency for Education dedicates a lot of funding for in-service training for teachers, principals, and pupil welfare professionals. Interviewees note that training and consultation is especially useful when delivered not only to individual teachers but a whole team of support organisers (including the principal and municipal officers); involving multiple actors can bring a more holistic change in working culture (see Box 1 for illustration of such trainings).

Box 1.

Capacity-building and consultations for education providers in Finland

To assist the adoption of the three-tiered model, the Finnish National Agency for Education funds various projects for educational staff development. There is a strong movement from individual in-service training days for teachers towards more long-lasting holistic development projects. Schools and municipalities wanting to start such projects can seek support from various training and consultation service providers. One such provider is the Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting, operating under the Finnish National Agency for Education. The consultants at Valteri can help local authorities, principals, teachers, and pupil welfare professionals build inclusive school systems via long-term (e.g., one-year) training programmes. For instance, together with the University of Jyväskylä, Valteri helps teams of support organisers (municipal and school staff) assess their needs, re-evaluate the municipality's values and culture, draw up development plans for the organisation of support, and share experiences with other experts.

Sources: https://www.valteri.fi/en/; https://www.jyu.fi/edupsy/fi/laitokset/koulutusjohtaminen/kji/koulutus/tukea-tuen-jarjestajille-vi-2022-2023-1

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[11] Pulkkinen, J. & Jahnukainen, M. 2016.

Challenges & limitations

According to interviewed stakeholders, the reform's design and implementation process has some limitations:

- **The national-level education authorities do not specify how the support should be organised.** One of the interviewed education experts noticed that while the current model creates a lot of flexibility and freedom for the education professionals, it also lacks guidance (e.g., what does "special support" entail and in what settings it should be delivered?). This ambiguity can discourage some municipalities from trying out new inclusive practices.
- Related to this, **the reformed model still allows organising special support (Tier 3) in segregated settings.** Interviewees share that the initial legislative proposal clearly stated that inclusive settings should be the only option, but this clause was later watered down due to political and financial pressures.
- **Administrative burden for the teachers has intensified since the reform.** For instance, a lot of support is organised on Tier 2, which requires individual pedagogical assessments and learning plans (see Figure 1 above), as well as monitoring and documentation of the student's response to the interventions (i.e., learning/behavioural outcomes). Only some schools have additional administrative staff to assist teachers with the paperwork.
- **Some schools struggle to build structures and school environments that fit new methods and redefine the roles of special education teachers and other staff.** Experts at the Valteri Centre observe that some schools manage to find innovative and efficient ways to utilise already available resources to provide inclusive education (e.g., co-teaching; team-teaching in large classrooms; assistants who not only work with individual students with disabilities but with the whole class). Other schools remain reluctant to try out inclusive settings and new pedagogical

methods out of fear that it may be too disruptive for the class and increase teacher burnout (e.g., they prefer special education teachers seeing students individually or in small groups in their own office).

(Potential) impact

According to interviewed stakeholders, the reform was partially successful in increasing inclusion:

- The reform **has lowered the number of unnecessary transfers to special education**; more students now follow the national curriculum and learn alongside their peers in mainstream settings at least part-time. Schools increasingly use the means of intensified support (Tier 2) before considering the option of special education (which is possible in Tier 3)[12,13].
- Secondly, **multi-professional collaboration has become more commonplace.** Co-teaching, a practice where teachers come to share their practical knowledge while working together to meet the needs of diverse student groups, became especially popular. Research shows that co-teaching can lead to shared responsibility for the student and a better understanding of student diversity, thus lightening teachers' workload in inclusive settings[14].
- Despite significant progress in some municipalities, the **overall number of pupils studying in a special group or class full-time, mostly residing in mainstream schools, has remained almost unchanged** (18 303 pupils in 2000, 18 207 pupils in 2021)[15]. The reasons behind that are mainly the legislation, which does not make inclusive education obligatory, as well as the lack of knowledge among teachers and education managers.

[12] Pulkkinen, J. & Jahnukainen, M. 2016.
[13] Education Statistics Finland. 2023. Available: https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/basic/Pages/Erityinen-ja-tehostettu-tuki.aspx
[14] Rytivaara, A., Pulkkinen, J. & Palmu, I. (2021).
[15] Education Statistics Finland. 2023.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

The three-tiered support model is already being applied nationwide in Finland; however, the quality of implementation can still be improved in most municipalities. Changes in teacher education programmes, consultations and trainings at school and municipal levels and networking between professionals should build a better understanding of inclusion in the future.

The model can be applied in other contexts. A similar model called Response to Intervention (RTI) is already commonplace in many parts of the United States[16] and

in Europe: Portugal[17] and Ireland[18] have recently adapted similar models. The Finnish model could be adapted in other countries; however, such a reform could benefit from more direct guidelines and stronger leadership from national-level authorities.

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[16] Björn, P. M. et al. 2016. "The Many Faces of Special Education Within RTI Frameworks in the United States and Finland". *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 39(1), pp. 58–66. DOI: 10.1177/0731948715594787

[17] See: OECD. 2022. *Review of Inclusive Education in Portugal. Chapter 4: Promoting school-level responses to student diversity.* Available: https://doi.org/10.1787/a9c95902-en

[18] More information on Ireland's Continuum of Support model: https://www.sess.ie/special-education-teacher-allocation/primary/continuum-support-primary

ProKoulu: An operating model for Finnish schools to support students' positive behaviour

Country:
Finland

Scale:
Over 100 schools

Type:
Practice

Year implemented:
Since 2013

Knowledge transfer:
Intermediated

Direct

At a glance:

ProKoulu is an approach for schools to respond to and prevent social, emotional and behaviour problems of students.

The three-tiered evidence-based approach centres on switching the school community's focus from negative behaviours and exchanges to positive expectations and interactions.

To implement ProKoulu, municipalities, schools and the ProKoulu research team sign three-year cooperation agreements, funded by municipalities.

The model is proven to reduce negative behaviour among students and improve the school's climate, ultimately creating better conditions for teaching and learning in inclusive settings.

Background

During the last two decades the Finnish education system has been moving towards a more inclusive direction – the number of special schools has decreased significantly and children with special education needs are taught increasingly within mainstream schools (although special classrooms remain common)[19]. The teachers' lack of skills to address the needs of students with emotional/behavioural disorders has become among main obstacles. Some stakeholders, including teachers'

unions, point to inclusive education as an explanation for negative developments including teachers' burnout and school violence[20]. According to interviewed education professionals in Finland, schools often do not have comprehensive plans on how to address behavioural problems of students (with or without disabilities), while teachers often resort to sanction-type responses and lack the skills to guide students in the right direction.

To support Finnish school communities in addressing and preventing behavioural problems, a group of researchers in 2013-2016 developed an operating model for the entire school called *ProKoulu*. The model was based on a universal approach called *School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support* (SWPBS), which is already being applied extensively in countries like the USA[21] and Norway[22]. The Ministry of Education and Culture funded

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[19] The number of special schools at the elementary school level was 195 in 2005 and reduced to 62 in 2022 (Statistics Finland, 2023). The share of pupils studying in a special group or class, mostly residing in mainstream schools, has remained almost unchanged. Between 2014 and 2020, the share of students who spend less than 20% in mainstream groups/classes has stood at around 6-5% of all children/learners (EASNIE, 2023).

[20] See, for example, Vairimaa, R. 2021. *How should we implement inclusive education?* Available: https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/finnish-schools/how-should-we-implement-inclusive-education

[21] For more information, see Center on PBIS. 2023. *Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports.* Available: https://www.pbis.org/pbis/what-is-pbis

[22] See Sørlie, M., Ogden, T. 2015. "School-Wide Positive Behavior Support-Norway: Impacts on Problem Behavior and Classroom Climate". *International Journal of School and Educational Psychology*, 16(1). Available: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2015.1060912

the research project, implemented by the universities of Eastern Finland (UEF), Jyväskylä (JYU) and the Niilo Mäki Institute. The research team tested the model's effectiveness via a randomised control trial (RCT) including 70 schools. After the national-level funding ended, new schools can still join programme by asking for funding from their local municipality. Municipalities can sign three-year cooperation agreements with the Niilo Mäki Institute (which functions as a foundation) and the local schools. At the beginning of 2023, over 100 schools across Finland have already adopted the model.

Approach

The *ProKoulu* research group designed the model based on international research and applied it to Finland's cultural and institutional context. The schools that decide to apply this model are supported by *ProKoulu* staff (consisting mostly of researchers and lecturers) and appointed coaches from the municipality, who visit the school at least four times a year. The coaches are usually already existing employees of the local municipality, such as school psychologists, social workers or teachers. The *ProKoulu* team trains these

coaches to ensure that someone will be able to lead the framework's implementation even after the three-year cooperation contract ends (see Figure 3).

The process of fully applying *ProKoulu* in a school and seeing results takes around five years, during which the school's community:

- **Transforms its operating culture.** All community members, including school staff and parents, develop behaviour support structures and practices. Interviewed education professionals, including a lead researcher of the ProKoulu model and a principal of a school applying *ProKoulu*, the commitment of the whole community is a crucial success factor for the model to work.
- **Develops common behavioural expectations**, which they then turn into clear rules (e.g., "I shall help others"). In the interviewed principal's school, the rules are written in bold big letters on the walls of the school's halls.
- **Positive behaviour is rewarded.** When students display positive behaviour (e.g., when a teacher sees that a student is helping their peer), they can be rewarded with tokens (e.g., cardboard smiles).

Figure 3. *The operational mechanism of adapting ProKoulu in schools*
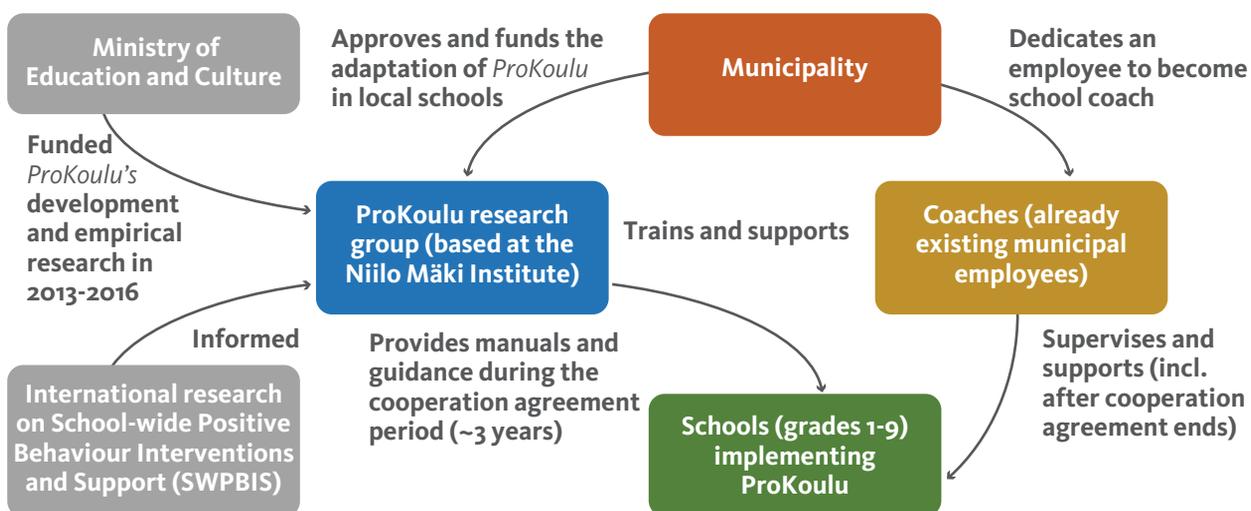
Source: developed by the authors based on interviews

By the end of the day, the tokens are collected and tallied towards a common reward for the class. For children with persisting emotional or behavioural problems, more intensified support strategies *(Check-in/Check-out* or *Check-in/Check-out Plus)* are foreseen. The *ProKoulu* model reflects the three-tiered support system for learning (general, intensified and special support) established in Finnish legislation. While the legislation does not specify how exactly the support should be arranged (this is left up to municipalities and schools to decide), *ProKoulu* provides clear methodologies and guidance for the school staff in this respect.

ProKoulu facilitates **knowledge transfer between education professionals** in various ways:

- The *ProKoulu* team trains coaches from the local municipality and supervises their work in schools;
- The *ProKoulu* team encourages schools to share their experience with other schools that are undergoing the development process (usually, several schools from one or several municipalities start applying *ProKoulu* jointly).
- The model requires team-based efforts and multiprofessional cooperation of the staff inside

the school. In the interviewed principal's school, co-teaching is applied (mainstream and a special education teachers work together in a classroom); regular meetings are held between the teachers, the principal and the learning support team (e.g., school curator, nurse, psychologist), which helps to organise both general and individual levels of support for students;

- There is a European network (PBS-Europe) and some national networks of schools applying SWPBS models where participating schools share *know-how*.

Success factors

Interviewed stakeholders specify several aspects that can positively affect *ProKoulu*'s implementation:

- **Support at the municipal level** (local education authorities), not only in terms of funding but also in terms of empowering the school leaders;
- **Competence and motivation of the assigned coach** that leads the process in the municipality;
- **School leaders' active involvement**, in terms of motivating the school staff and creating an

organisational structure that allows to dedicate sufficient time and resources for the system to work;

- **Buy-in and commitment from the school staff**. At least the majority of teachers should support the idea of inclusion and the principles behind the *ProKoulu* model; changes must not be made in haste, but in small and timely steps in order to maintain a positive work environment and trust among the teachers (e.g., visiting a school where *ProKoulu* is already successfully applied can motivate the teachers);
- **Focusing on universal support (Tier 1) as a base** is an important first step; only then the intensified individual support for the students (Tiers 2 and 3) should be planned.

Challenges & limitations

The interviewees mention several challenges and limitations of implementing the *ProKoulu* model:

- **Some teachers show mistrust in the model's potential for success,** especially at the secondary level. Interviewees notice that some subject area teachers initially believe that their focus should be placed on teaching academic, rather than social skills of the pupils;
- **Finland's decentralised education system creates disparities in how different schools address behaviour problems**. After the initial project funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture ended, municipalities need to voluntarily show initiative and dedicate funding to adapt the *ProKoulu* model, while other municipalities still resort to traditional (and less effective) methods. Funding from the national budget could potentially allow a wider adoption.

(Potential) impact

The positive impacts of SWPBS operating models have been widely documented in academic literature[23] and were also apparent during the RCT implemented by the *ProKoulu* research group (to be published), as well as noticed in practice by the interviewed school principal. Applying SWPBS operating models in a school can:

- **Reduce the students' problematic behaviours**. For instance, the principal notices that *ProKoulu* reduced the occurrence of disruptive behaviour and violence to a minimum in the school he previously worked in. As a positive side effect, the *ProKoulu* research group leader notices that it also **reduces bullying**;
- **Reduce teacher burnout and time spent on correcting the pupils' negative behaviour.** The preliminary findings from the RCT show that teachers spend approx. two hours less on correcting disruptive behaviour every week;
- **Reduce the need for school-based services and special education support for at-risk students;**
- **Improve the overall climate in the school**, including relationships between teachers, students and teachers-students.

Ultimately, these effects create a better environment for all children to be taught in inclusive settings.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

SWPBS operating models are already being applied in many countries and can be tailored to local cultural, social and institutional backgrounds. For instance, based on the success of *ProKoulu,* a group of higher education institutions, research organisations and public authorities in Finland, Cyprus, Romania and Greece implemented an Erasmus+ project, aimed at capacity building of authorities and education professionals[24]. One of the strengths of the *ProKoulu* model is that it requires funding only at the inception phase, gradually interweaving into the school's daily practices. Although currently only a fraction of schools in Europe applies similar models, their relevance may grow in the future, especially given that the lack of knowledge on how to address behavioural problems is seen as a significant hindrance to inclusive education.

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[23]   See, for example, Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M. & Leaf, Ph. J. 2010. "Examining the Effects of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports on Student Outcomes". *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 12(3). Doi: 10.1177/1098300709334798

[24]   More information available at: https://pbiseurope.org/en/about

Capacity-building practices in Lithuanian schools to provide inclusive education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Country:
Lithuania

Scale:
National/ local/ community

Type:
Policy/practices

Year implemented:
Since 2010s

Knowledge transfer:
Intermediated

Direct

Platform

At a glance:

In Lithuania, the number of children with ASD in mainstream schools has grown significantly during the last decade; however, many education professionals still feel unprepared to work in increasingly diverse classrooms.

Schools try to adapt to these changes in various ways: through consultations with the national Counselling Department for Children with Developmental Disorders, less formal exchanges with nearby special schools or based on their own voluntary capacity-building initiatives.

Although the impact of such capacity-building practices is not actively monitored, parents and experts notice a positive change in the working culture and attitudes among the staff of mainstream schools across the country.

The model is proven to reduce negative behaviour among students and improve the school's climate, ultimately creating better conditions for teaching and learning in inclusive settings.

Background

In Lithuania, the share of children with a diagnosis of childhood autism has more than doubled between 2016 and 2021.[25] This increase, coupled with more inclusive education policies after the ratification of the UN CRPD in 2010,[26] brought a significant growth in the number of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in mainstream schools. Most teachers, however, felt unprepared to address the highly diverse needs of these students.

There are different ways in which mainstream schools try to adapt to these changes. On the national level, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport acknowledged the need for support for education professionals and parents of children with ASD and therefore established a Counselling Department for Children with

[25]   From 105,6 to 238,9 children per 100,000 children (Institute of Hygiene, 2022).

[26]   From 2024, the Law on Education will require mainstream schools to be ready to accept children with SEN at the request of the parents. The Government planned ~151 mln. Euros of investments for 2023-2029 aimed at strengthening schools in the field of inclusive education. For more information, see Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2022. *Guidelines for the Development of Inclusive Education*. Available: https://smsm. lrv.lt/uploads/smsm/documents/files/aalaikini/Itraukties%20 svietime%20pletros%20gaires%201.pdf

Developmental Disorders (henceforth, the Department) in 2019. The Department provides support to schools across the country. More locally, some special schools also provide methodological support to mainstream schools – a good example of that is Vilnius Šilas Special School, which voluntarily set up a mobile team to consult mainstream schools in their city. The mobile team's activities are currently funded on a project basis by Vilnius City Municipality. School-level initiatives exist as well: Dovilai School for Primary and Basic Education (grades 1-10) accepted their first pupil with ASD who had severe behavioural problems in 2011 and, since then, became well-known for utilising various methods to improve their school's environment, build their teachers' capacities and meet the needs of children with SEN.

Approaches

Counselling Department for Children with Developmental Disorders. The Department operates on a national level and, at the time of writing this study in 2023, employs 21 specialists. According to the director of the Department, its main goal is to improve the effectiveness of teaching children with ASD via several strands of activities:

- **Consulting education service providers and parents on the education process of children with ASD.** This mostly relates to the management of individual cases and includes three-party contracts between the Department, the school and the child's parents. The team of specialists from the Department visits a school to observe the environment that surrounds the child and collect data on how the school organises their education process. Based on this, the team provides recommendations on how that environment should change to help the child feel better. This consultation process may be single-time or periodic (every week or month), depending on needs, and is free of charge. So far, the Department has worked with around 70 schools across Lithuania.
- **Delivering in-service training and seminars for education professionals, educational assistance**

specialists and parents. According to the Director, these types of events are especially relevant when focused on a particular school community. The specialists also facilitate self-help groups for parents of children with ASD.
- **Developing methodological recommendations for school communities, pedagogues, and parents.** This activity was especially relevant during COVID-19 lockdowns when school visits were not possible. Various brochures in Lithuanian can be found on the Department's website on how to improve the education process of children with ASD and, overall, children with emotional or behavioural support needs.
- **Promoting a positive behaviour and intervention support system** (PBIS or PEPIS in Lithuanian), which is meant to improve academic and behavioural results of children with and without SEN (similarly to *ProKoulu*). In April 2023, the Department organised a widely attended international conference on PBIS, which was broadcasted online.[27]
- **Coordinating a network of ASD-friendly schools** *A. spektras*. Although the network is supposed to unite schools that are fully prepared to educate children with developmental disorders and consult other schools in their region, the director of the Department, as well as a parent representative, claim that most of the schools are yet to meet this standard (e.g., transferring children with behavioural problems to home-schooling is still an option in some schools). Nevertheless, the network provides a space for schools to exchange experiences.

Vilnius Šilas Special School. The school accepts children with developmental delaysand intellectual disabilities. For three years, the school's **mobile team of special education specialists has been consulting teachers and principals in mainstream schools.** The schools that receive this support service must choose a specific case, e.g., a child who learns according to an Individual

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[27]   II International PBIS conference (2023) can be accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVyZltVcr9Q

Education Plan (IEP); then, the mobile team observes the child's education process and the school's environment and discusses with the teachers what works and does not. Following this, the school's staff pays a visit to Vilnius Šilas Special School to observe how education is organised there. According to a member of the mobile team (ethics teacher), this step helps to change the often negative and pessimistic perceptions of the mainstream teachers and inspires them to seek solutions. Lastly, the school, together with the mobile team, draws up a plan of intervention. The specialists provide recommendations and pay follow-up visits to the school to see how the implementation process is going. The mobile team can work with one school for a one-year period at the longest.

Dovilai School for Primary and Basic Education. The school is based in a small town and has over 300 students; around 120 children attend a kindergarten which is connected to the school. In 2023, the school had around 50 children formally recognised as having SEN, mostly with high or moderate levels of needs (two-three children with SEN in every class). Children with intellectual disabilities are taught with the rest of the class 70-80% of the time while the rest of the curriculum is adapted: they attend art therapy, applied behavioural analysis (ABA) therapy, are taught social skills, etc. According to the principal of the school, **the school's staff strengthens its capacities in various ways:**

- **Visits and exchanges.** At the beginning of the inclusion process, the school's team visited a nearby special school in Plungė, which also functions as a consultation centre. This helped to motivate the teachers, learn more about skill development of children with SEN, see how sensory/relaxation rooms can be equipped and utilised, etc. Moreover, the school's principal and some staff members are planning to visit some leading inclusive schools in Scandinavia and Italy via the Erasmus+ programme.
- **Utilising methodological resources.** The school's staff regularly communicate and share material with higher education institutions, autism associations and parents, and attend various courses. The principal notes that while not all in-service training courses are useful (e.g., they provide very basic information), the teachers are motivated to seek more information themselves.)
- **Collaborating with the Counselling Department for Children with Developmental Disorders**.

This includes consultations on individual children's needs, as well as participation in the network *A. Spektras* and other events.

- **Providing learning opportunities to special education assistants (SNAs).** Although the legislation requires SNAs to have only a secondary education diploma, the Dovilai School encourages them to attend additional courses funded by the municipality; some SNAs are enrolled in education programmes to become pedagogues or speech and language therapists. The principal mentions that the SNAs are not "glued" to one child (which is still a prevalent practice in some schools) but work alongside the teacher in the classroom.

Success factors

The interviewed stakeholders expressed similar ideas as to the success factors behind inclusive education:

- **The motivation and positive attitude of the school staff.** The principal of Dovilai School shares that some of the teachers have children with SEN in their own families, which helps to create a more inclusive school culture;
- **Providing a space for collaboration and exchange of knowledge within the school.** The mobile team member from Šilas Special School notes that leadership of the school's administration, as well as synergies between the classroom teachers and special education teachers, matter a lot. The school administration's responsibility is to ensure that the teachers have enough time/energy to consult with others, differentiate their teaching methods, etc.
- **Sharing of knowledge and experience outside of the school.** Interviewees emphasise that networks, mentoring, peer-learning and exchange visits are especially effective for learning.
- **Positive relationships with local authorities**. Municipalities can fund various capacity-building activities for schools, as well as hire additional therapists and psychologists who visit them.
- **Openness and communication with parents**. This includes consultations with the parents of children with SEN, but also communication with the rest of the parents. This helps to create a more accepting environment, particularly when there are children who have less visible disabilities, such as ASD, in the classroom.

Challenges & limitations

The interviewed stakeholders mentioned several aspects that slow down the transition to inclusive education:

- **Many teachers in Lithuania still feel unprepared and/or unwilling to try out new teaching methods.** The director of the Department, as well as the mobile team member from Šilas Special School, note that some education professionals see them as auditors rather than partners. Teachers believe that the recommendations provided by the specialists will add to their already high workload. In Lithuania, teachers often feel pressured to complete the academic curriculum and assign little priority to the well-being of students and the teaching of social skills. Thus, removing a 'problematic' child from the classroom is still a preferred approach in some schools. The representative of a parent association for children with ASD shares that mainstream school administrators sometimes discourage parents from enrolling children with high behavioural support needs and can even recommend home-schooling.
- **Many schools' directors do not demonstrate leadership in terms of capacity-building.** When the school's teachers receive recommendations from specialists or complete in-service training/ seminars, the schools' directors rarely make sure that this new information and know-how translates into a systematic practice for the whole school.
- **Schools often struggle to ensure timely support to the pupils**. Parents and school/kindergarten staff often avoid seeking support (partially because this entails an evaluation and a diagnosis), lowering the opportunities for early intervention. In such cases, the Department's team must focus on "putting out fires" (e.g., when a child's behaviour becomes aggressive) rather than supporting the school to implement systematic changes. Moreover, delays are caused by the support allocation model, which requires an external evaluation as well as parental approval before allocating extra hours of teaching or therapy to the child.

(Potential) impact

The director of the Counselling Department for Children with Developmental Disorders acknowledges that **impact monitoring is still an underdeveloped area in their work**. She estimates that around half of the schools are actively trying to implement the provided recommendations. As of Spring 2023, there was no mechanism to evaluate whether the recommendations helped the child or not. In the future, the Department plans to send out follow-up questionnaires to the schools that received their support.

The long-term impact of the services provided by Vilnius Šilas Special School is also not monitored. However, the teacher who is part of the mobile team notices that, in many cases, **the consultations bring about attitudinal changes** among the staff of mainstream schools during the year. He believes that the scheme is already a good start to improve inclusion since it requires the school to try out new methodologies and opens a window for collaboration.

The principal of Dovilai school notes that the school's **inclusive practices have attracted interest in Lithuania:** parents of children with SEN from the broader region are applying to their school, often as an alternative to A special school; moreover, other educators in Lithuania are keen to learn from Dovilai school and often request to visit it. The school's visitors often notice that children with SEN, including children with ASD, **participate in learning and pastime activities equally alongside their peers** and are not marked out by their teachers.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

All three examples can be replicated in other contexts, especially the Dovilai and Šilas schools' activities, which are not formalised and were established as **grassroots initiatives** with little or no additional funding from municipalities. Similar capacity-building practices may become more widespread in Lithuania, given that the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is

demonstrating commitment to inclusive education in its strategic documents and recent initiatives.[28] In the school year 2023-2024, eight special schools are gaining the status of regional special education centres, which are meant to **foster inclusive education innovations** in their region (Vilnius Šilas Special School is set to become one of these centres). The Ministry is also establishing a national body – Lithuanian inclusive education centre – to provide methodological support to schools and municipalities and implement research activities. The Counselling Department for Children with Developmental Disorders is hoping to create synergies with the newly established (or transformed) bodies and scale up their activities.

[28]   For more information, see Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. 2022. *Guidelines for the Development of Inclusive Education.*

Slovenian special schools' mobile services to mainstream schools

Country: **Slovenia**

Scale: **National**

Type: **Policy**

Year implemented: **Since 2011**

Knowledge transfer: **Direct**

At a glance:

The shift towards more inclusive education and deinstitutionalisation exposed that mainstream schools lack specialists who could support children with SEN.

In Slovenia, special institutions (special schools and resource centres) became a base of mobile special educators who work as additional professional support teachers in different mainstream schools.

If a mainstream school cannot support a child's additional needs on its own, it can sign individual contracts with special institutions for expert assistance, which is funded by the Ministry of Education.

The mobile services model provides a great opportunity for knowledge transfer between education professionals, although it is currently more focused on individually delivered support.

Background

Policy imperatives to transform the role of special schools and implement deinstitutionalisation encouraged the formation of inclusive education in Slovenia. The Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (58/2011) gives children the right to their own personalised Individual Education Plan and, depending on their needs, additional professional support.

According to the Act, the support can be organised in multiple ways. Since mainstream schools often lack in-house staff who could address the needs of children with SEN, the support is commonly delivered through so-called mobile services (*mobilna služba* in Slovenian) – mobile teams of special educators who are employees of special schools.

During the last two decades, a system of collaboration with experts from special schools, pre-schools and mainstream schools developed, which is now a core tool in adapting and meeting the needs of an individual child.[29] The expert support for learners is financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.[30]

Approach

Mainstream schools can employ their own experts in special education (specialist teachers, inclusive pedagogues, surdo-pedagogues, speech therapists, tiflo-pedagogues, social pedagogues, etc.) to provide students with Additional Professional Support (APS). Alternatively, they can ask specialised institutions (special schools and resource centres) for expert assistance in implementing APS. These institutions sign individual contracts with each school for every learner and provide mobile services. Hybrid models combining the two options are also possible.

[29] Štemberger, T. & Kiswarday, V. R. 2017. "Attitude towards inclusive education: the perspective of Slovenian preschool and primary school teachers". *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. Available: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1297573

[30] EASNIE. 2017. *Financing policies for inclusive education systems. Country Study Visit Report: Slovenia.* Available: https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/agency-projects/FPIES/CSV/FPIES%20Slovenia%20Country%20Study%20Visit%20Report.pdf

The APS comprises of up to five hours a week[31] of which:

- One hour is reserved for **counselling aimed to create an inclusive surrounding**. It is provided to families, education staff and other children in a group or class who are in contact with a child with SEN; it can be carried out either by teachers or school counsellors or by special pedagogues in various fields.
- The rest of the time is given to **addressing delays, conditions and disabilities or supporting learning.** These activities are directed towards the individual child. The length of APS depends on the level of education, as well as the child's disabilities and needs.

Over time, special schools became bases for mobile special educators who work as APS teachers for learners with SEN in different mainstream schools. For example, in 2017, the Janez Levec Special Education Centre in Ljubljana had 40 mobile specialist teachers[32]; the Ljubljana School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing offered over 400 hours of additional support per week delivered to over 300 learners included in 170 different schools and kindergartens mainstream schools[33]; smaller special schools have mobile service teams consisting of two-four members (such as Jarše Youth Centre described in Box 2).

For example, a principal of a mainstream school shares that his school gets 100 hours of APS per week, delivered by specialists from four different special schools. The support is very child-centric: although the principal encourages the educators to provide most of the support in the classroom setting, ~80% of the support is provided in one-on-one or small group settings, while ~20% of hours are spent in the classroom.

Success factors

The mobile services partially **address the problem of lacking resources and competencies inside mainstream schools.** The specialist teachers working as providers of mobile services constantly develop their skills by exchanging new gathered experiences and skills with their colleagues.[34] According to a specialist teacher from the Jarše Youth Centre, being

Box 2.

Mobile services to support students with behavioural and emotional problems

Mobile services by the Jarše Youth Centre, which specialises in education of children with behavioural or emotional problems, consist of two members. At the request of a school, parents or social services, the team carries out interventions if a child or adolescent refuses school, behaves in an aggressive or self-destructive manner, has prominent emotional outbursts, etc. Usually, the team gets involved in the event of a crisis. At first, the team meets with the parents/guardians at their home to understand the life situation of the child and his family and build trust. If needed, the specialists organise multiple (8-10, sometimes up to 17) meetings with the student, parents and other important persons or institutions (e.g., teachers or social workers) to understand the underlying problems and plan appropriate interventions. In addition to these meetings, the Jarše Youth Centre provides training and consultations for teaching staff and parents with practical solutions for a specific case.

Sources: interview with Jarše Youth Centre's mobile services team

part of the mobile team also **allows impartiality and helps to build trust** among the different persons/institutions involved. Stakeholders agree that the **involvement of the whole school community** (including teachers, individual assistants, principals, pupils and parents) is an important success factor for the inclusion of children with SEN. A principal of a mainstream school notes that the **counselling sessions** are great for facilitating interdisciplinary knowledge sharing. The principal believes that hybrid models – involving mobile specialists and the school's own teachers – work best.

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31   Blind children and children with visual impairments or/and children with several disorders may have additional three hours of assistance a week.

32   EASNIE. 2017.

33   EASNIE. 2017.

34   EASNIE. 2017.

Challenges & limitations

The challenges and disadvantages of the system of providing APS through mobile services are the following:

- **Mobile specialists are not deeply involved in day-to-day school life and things that happen between their visits.** In many cases, the specialists provide services in several schools, limiting their involvement in a single school community. The meetings with class teachers often remain formal.
- Related to the first point, **lack of resources limit and delay the involvement of specialists.** According to representatives of the Institute of Education (ZRSŠ), there is a lack of specialists who could work with children with intellectual disabilities, children who are visually impaired, etc. Waiting lists are a common issue, which was exacerbated by COVID-19.
- **Support is child-centred rather than aimed at the whole school community.** It is still common for specialists to withdraw children from the classroom to provide APS. The psycho-medical paradigm is still dominating in the viewpoints of the specialists and the placement and integration of children with SEN.[35] The mobile team members from Jarše Youth Centre share that school administrators and parents still often address behaviour problems through punishment and threats to expel children from the school. Their team tries to address this challenge by changing the attitudes of parents and school staff, but their time is mostly eaten up by "putting out fires", leaving little opportunity to deal with systemic issues.
- **The legislation for APS provision is quite rigid and based on the child's diagnosis.** Schools would like more autonomy in managing their APS budget; procedures for gathering learners' official decisions and hours for APS are long (it may take six months) and are sometimes inadequate for the learner's needs, which are also changeable.[36]
- Moreover, the **inclusion of children with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities is limited by legislation.** Children who need special education legally cannot be educated simultaneously in the same classroom that follows the general curriculum and thus, they are transferred to a special classroom or special school.

(Potential) impact

Mobile specialist teachers have become key collaborators and supporters of inclusion in mainstream schools. All interviewed stakeholders agree that the mobile services model provides a great opportunity for knowledge transfer between education professionals. In some cases, the involvement of mobile services can be the main resort that allows children with SEN to stay in mainstream education. However, the potential impact of mobile services is limited by the current system that is based primarily on individually delivered rather than classroom or whole-school-based support. The number of children learning in special schools or special classrooms is growing in Slovenia;[37] therefore, it is fair to say that **mobile services have become an additional rather than alternative role for special schools**; mobile services in their current form are not sufficient to phase out the two-tier education system.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

As mentioned above, mobile services are an additional activity for special schools, while most of their responsibilities still relate to direct teaching of children with SEN inside special schools or units within mainstream schools. In the future, their role could be transformed even further (as in, e.g., Portugal, where special schools were completely transformed into resource centres for inclusion). Nonetheless, similar models of mobile services (especially with a stronger focus on transforming the learning environment) could be replicated in other countries as a transitional measure on the way to inclusive education.

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[35]   Lesar, I. & Žveglič Mihelič, M. 2018. "Beliefs of university staff teaching in pedagogical study programmes on concept(s) of inclusiveness – the case of Slovenia". *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(2), pp. 1-15. Available: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1488186

[36]   EASNIE. 2017.

[37]   EASNIE. 2023. In Slovenia, 3397 children with an official decision of SEN (ISCED levels 1 and 2) were educated in separate special classes or in separate special schools in 2012-13; 4323 children in 2019-20 were educated in separate groups/classes for more than 80% of the time or in separate special schools. Available: https://www.european-agency.org/data/slovenia/datatable-overview#tab-all_children_learners

Erickson: Italy's leading knowledge centre for inclusive education

Country:
Italy

Scale:
National

Type:
Practice

Year implemented:
Since 1980s

Knowledge transfer:
Intermediated

Platform

At a glance:

Edizioni Centro Studi Erickson (Henceforth: Erickson) was created to address the lack of practical material for educational professionals working with children with disabilities.

Run by some of Italy's leading pioneers of inclusive education, the organisation is a private knowledge centre that conducts publishing, research, and training activities nationwide.

Erickson's enables knowledge transmission and creation through its extensive network of professionals in education and social/medical care, as well as schools and groups of schools.

The centre's publications and training have become national points of reference for support teachers, both for day-to-day activities and professional development and specialisation.

Background

Erickson is a private publishing house and studies centre in Trento, North-Eastern Italy. Best described as a "knowledge centre" or a "knowledge hub", it publishes books; develops educational software, apps, tools and games; devises evaluation instruments; publishes peer-reviewed journals; conducts a vast amount of original research; and organises online and in-person conferences and trainings, from small-scale initiatives tailored for individual teachers and schools to mass trainings for thousands of people. Virtually all interviewees identify Erickson as Italy's leading knowledge centre for inclusive education.

Established in 1984, Erickson stems from the initiative of a group of four psychologists who actively participated in Italy's pioneering transition to inclusive education in the 1970s-1980s.[38] Erickson's initiators had their formative years in the midst of **revolutionary changes and ideas**[39] and sought to **translate them into practice**. Their collaboration began in 1979. While working together at a behavioural therapy centre for children, they began translating English-language academic literature and practical manuals. In their interaction with their patients' teachers, the group

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[38] Transition followed the approval of three legal instruments: *Law 118/1977* (which established that compulsory education - six to 14yo - should be attended in *general schools,* and that schools, national and local authorities, and local medical centres had to adopt necessary measures to include children with disabilities); *Law 517/1977* (which created the professional figure of *insegnante di sostegno,* support teachers, to assist students with disabilities); and *Sentence 215/1987* (which extended the right to inclusion to high school). The Italian school cycle includes five grades of primary school, followed by three of "first degree secondary school", or *scuola media* ("intermediate school"), and four or five of "second degree secondary school", or *scuola superiore* ("upper school"), corresponding to high school.

[39] The Italian experience had its roots in the critical approach to education emerged from the 1968 contestations of traditional education begun at the University of Berkeley, as well as local, organically developed educational experiments developed in the 1950s and 1960s by progressive Catholic figure such as Father Lorenzo Milani. Several interviewees identify these local practices as crucial to the Italian experience. See also Nocera, S. 2002. *La normativa sull'educazione inclusiva delle persone con disabilità in Italia*. Available: https://www.edscuola. it/archivio/handicap/inclusiva.html

understood that this knowledge could be useful also for schools: this gave them the idea to set up a publishing house focused on *practical* manuals, as much of the literature of the time was more focused on theoretical issues. In 1984, Erickson was formally born.

Approach

Over the years, Erickson has grown into a self-sustaining activity of around 120 employees, with a distinct focus on **disability inclusion** and a **highly participatory approach**, involving in its activities a network of researchers, editors, psychologists, educators, speech therapists, teachers, and school directors. Although it **sustains itself on the market**, Erickson also collaborates with public authorities, which commission research and give Erickson's researchers access to state-funded organisations and services for persons with disabilities. Erickson has arguably become the **largest and best-known centre of preservation and transmission** of the wealth of knowledge accumulated following Italy's transition, and the **production of new knowledge** to study and address the current challenges faced by the inclusive education system. Its relationship with the public sector also allows it to **transmit this knowledge to public institutions**, and in turn, gather data from them.

Erickson operates in publishing, research, and training. In each area, it works by establishing networks of researchers, individual educators, and schools: this has turned it into a knowledge hub that attracts and employs some of the most pioneering thinkers and practitioners in the field of inclusive education.[40]

Erickson's vast **publishing activities** include school manuals, pedagogical material for inclusive education, academic treaties and peer-reviewed journals on disability, and widely popular general teaching material. **Diversification** allows it to build economies of scale and finance more niche, specialised research activities, while **addressing the knowledge needs of a diverse target**, from school to social services to academia.

Erickson's **research activities** are done *in-house*, conducting **original research** on disability, inclusion and education, with an eye on **intersectional issues**, rather than just publishing studies produced elsewhere. This allowed Erickson to foster a generation

of researchers who produce original content in coordination with its R&D staff, enabling the centre to **set its own research goals** on inclusion and disability and help set the agenda of **national debate and research**. As it enjoys close ties with schools, Erickson can focus on **research that is directly and immediately relevant** for education professionals. Erickson's researchers work in direct contact with persons with disabilities, and several of the centre's researchers are themselves educators.

Erickson's **training activities**, where the centre's research and networking vocation converge, are at the core of Erickson's role as a centre of transmission of knowledge. The centre's vast training offer includes:

- *Individual trainings* to gain professional qualifications in all fields of inclusive education.[41] Erickson hosts a database of over 1 200 trained experts who have completed their professional specialisation courses. Schools or parents can search this database by province and contact experts directly.
- *Online courses*, some of which confer academic credits, including around a dozen postgraduate certificates on learning disabilities, inclusive education, ASD, neuropsychology, and child protection; and online events on all areas of inclusive education, social inclusion and social work.
- *Bespoke trainings*: group trainings organised upon request of individual schools, social cooperatives or public authorities on specific topics, or to help schools strengthen inclusive education. Erickson's experts identify the organisation's needs and devise tailored training. These include courses to help teachers devise Individual Education Plans, the personalised learning projects that schools are required to draft (alongside social and medical territorial services) for each student with disabilities.

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[40] The late Andrea Canevaro, a trailblazer of inclusive education at a European level, regularly collaborated with Erickson until his death in 2022. Dario Ianes himself, a founder of Erickson, is recognised as one of the country's key pioneers.

[41] Erickson's offer covers all needs pertaining to "Special Education Needs" (*Bisogni Educativi Speciali*) and "Specific Learning Disorders" (*Disturbi specifici dell'apprendimento*), defined by Italian law as all impairments - disabilities, socio-economic marginalisation, language difficulties for migrants - precluding students' learning. Available: https://www.miur.gov.it/dsa

Erickson's flagship knowledge transfer initiatives are the **Rimini Conferences,** three-day mass events attended by thousands of education professionals and disability specialists from social and medical services. The conferences' focus alternates each year between quality of inclusive education and social inclusion, and participatory and inclusive educational methods. Erickson's conferences are organised to be logistically affordable with low-cost accommodation and participation fees, as the main target is teachers, who may have limited disposable income and sometimes rely on schools' funds to attend. The conferences include workshops, plenaries, roundtables and other small group discussions and have become major opportunities for education practitioners to exchange ideas and circulate knowledge on inclusive education and pedagogical methodologies. Plenaries provide inspirational speeches and examples, often with persons with disabilities or their family members as speakers, while smaller events have a distinctively *practical* approach, centring on mutual learning and comparing of practices and ideas.

Success factors

Erickson's key to success are **networking** and **diversification of activities**, enabling and accelerating knowledge transmission. Erickson's success as a private entity lies largely in its ability to **cooperate with the public sector, from schools to service providers and authorities**, and foster the development of diverse networks of researchers, writers, teachers, parents, and social or medical disability experts. This turned it into a multidisciplinary centre that bridges the gap between academic research and day-to-day practice.

Erickson also showcases the **benefit of involving private initiative** in knowledge production, as its financial independence grants it flexibility, ability to set its own agenda, and capacity to be a social innovator.

Challenges & limitations

One of the practices' limitations is that its conferences and **trainings tend to attract education professionals already motivated to engage**: However, as most

interviewees report, in the current context many of the support teachers in the Italian educational system enter this profession as a "backup plan".

Another limitation is language: Erickson is the main observatory of Italy's radical model of inclusive education, which developed through the practice of experimental educational solutions, and boasts several decades of evidence to back it up; sadly, the existing international literature on inclusive education often fails to note this, as studies on this topic, including Erickson's, are often published only in Italian.[42]

(Potential) impact

Erickson is **pivotal in knowledge production, transfer and dissemination** in Italy. According to an interviewed former support teacher, who lived multiple phases of school inclusion from the 1990s to the 2020s, Erickson's manuals are the primary reference for all support teachers in Italy. Research-wise, as an interviewed professor of inclusive education puts it, Erickson's work is "of monumental importance".

Opportunities for scalability & replication

For knowledge production centres like Erickson, economies of scale help. This model is, thus, more suitable to medium and larger European countries with a sufficiently large market for published material, but the development of similar centres can also be promoted in smaller countries if public funding is made available to help cover organisational and operational costs. In order to do this, however, public authorities should leave considerable room for manoeuvre to private actors to avoid stifling their innovative potential.

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[42] Bellacicco, R., Dell'Anna, S. and Marsili, F. 2022. "Italian models and perspectives School inclusion in Italy. A Mapping Review of empirical research." *L'integrazione scolastica e sociale* 21 (4), pp. 40-79; Dell'Anna, S., Bellacicco, R. and Ianes, D. 2023. *Cosa sappiamo dell'inclusione scolastica in Italia? I contributi della ricerca empirica.* Trento: Erickson. Ianes, D., Demo, H. and Dell'Anna, S. 2020. "Inclusive education in Italy: Historical steps, positive developments, and challenges." *Prospects* 49, pp. 249-263.

Istituto Comprensivo "Daniele Spada" in Italy: opening school, local services, and community to each other

Country:
Italy

Scale:
Local and community

Type:
Practice

Year implemented:
Since 2010s

Knowledge transfer:
Direct

At a glance:

IC Sovere is a mainstream school that strives to address the needs of a growing number of students with disabilities despite a decrease in public funding for schools and social services.

Thanks to the initiative of its staff and the use of innovative pedagogical methods, IC Sovere practices total inclusion by involving communities, social services, and former special schools.

By operating as the centre of a network, the school practices a continuous process of education to inclusion and diversity through knowledge transfer to the students themselves, rather than just to the teachers who work with students with disabilities.

The school had managed to become a local point of reference and inspiration for innovation and inclusion both for the educational community of the area and local society at large.

Background

The *Istituto Comprensivo*[43] *"Daniele Spada"* in Sovere (henceforth, IC Sovere) is a mainstream school providing elementary, primary and lower secondary education, located in the Bergamo province in

Lombardy. IC Sovere uses innovative pedagogical principles and evidence-based learning practices to pursue complete inclusion of students with disabilities, operating in close cooperation and integration with authorities, local communities, and social and medical-pedagogical services for persons with disabilities.

IC Sovere operates in a challenging context for Italian schools, characterised by a reduction in national funding for education,[44] an increase in the number of students with additional learning support needs, which the growth in the number of teachers still struggles to meet, and growing resistance from medical authorities to issue the formal assessment of students' functioning needed to ensure they can receive a support teacher. An additional issue derives from the lack of job security for many teachers. In this context, to quote IC Sovere's director, "schools are asked to put patches on patches that are already falling off" and increasingly expected to provide the social and psychological care services that public authorities are not able to provide anymore.

Approach

IC Sovere follows the idea that **every student, with or without disabilities, has unique educational**

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[43] *Istituto comprensivo* is a school covering the grades of *scuola dell'infanzia/materna* ("childhood school/maternal school", for children aged 3-6), *scuola primaria/elementare* ("primary/elementary school", for 6-11yos), and *scuola media/scuola secondaria di primo grado* ("intermediate school/First level secondary school", for 11-13yos).

[44] Some stakeholders note that the issue may be more with *sub-optimal allocation* of funding rather than with an overall decrease.

needs, and the school's support teachers follow the principles of promoting socialisation, acceptance, fostering relationships, educating to practice empathy, and inclusion in all activities. Accordingly, the school organises numerous activities to remove barriers between students, raise all children to see disabilities as a normal part of life, educate them to advocate for their own or their classmates' needs, and normalise accommodating different needs. This is done through numerous **cooperations with specialised services to create activities destined to the whole class**, and not only students with disabilities. The school thus generates a continuous and unique process of knowledge transfer to the students themselves, rather than just to the teachers who work with students with disabilities.

At IC Sovere, educational activities and spaces are carefully planned around inclusion. Educational activities at primary level are personalised to each student's learning time frame. For children aged 11-13, who are expected to engage in more abstract learning, the school relies on technology: all such students use technological devices at the same time with tailored apps. This avoids the often-found issue that students with disabilities sit isolated, using a computer or tablet, while everybody else works on traditional books. Spaces outside classrooms are also adapted for inclusion, being furbished as relax areas accessible to all students, with warm floors, tactile walls, immersive spaces with projections of natural landscapes, or open areas for group learning.

IC Sovere promotes co-teaching practices, open air teaching, and non-traditional activities: students tend to vegetable gardens, make herbal teas to sell at fairs, and even care for an animal farm. These activities help all students (and especially those with psycho-social disabilities or behavioural issues) release stress. Once a week, the school **hosts the users of a day care centre for persons with disabilities,** conducting joint activities in the school's vegetable garden and familiarising students with living and working with adults with disabilities.

The school fosters inclusion through art and sport activities. In cooperation with local Paralympic sports associations, students are involved in inclusive sports for

mixed teams. Pupils can also develop art projects (e.g., tactile renditions of artworks) to help their classmates with visual impairments learn about art history, while helping other students understand how their classmates with disabilities experience reality. Students are actively involved in accompanying activities for classmates with disabilities in workshops such as music and dance. Often, students with disabilities are involved in multiple classes' workshop activities.

Among the most prominent initiatives that involve territorial services, **IC Sovere collaborates with specialised educational service providers (former special schools)**:

- The school collaborates with the Institute for Blind People, which helps schools of Lombardy and Piedmont care for hundreds of blind and visually impaired pupils. The Institute helps the schools through its research and development of tactile educational material and adaptation of schoolbooks in Braille (for blind students) and enlarged font (for visually impaired students).

- It also collaborates with a major rehabilitation institute[45], which operates as a residential care centre and medical-pedagogical services provider for children with severe disabilities and neurodevelopment issues, in cooperation with mainstream schools. Educators from IC Sovere work closely with the rehabilitation institute's staff to address the needs of students with severe disabilities who require a holistic learning project and significant medical care. Such students spend part of their time at IC Sovere and part at the institute for tailored extracurricular activities such as swimming and educational workshops. The institute's speech therapists and neuropsychiatrists monitor the learning progress and help the IC Sovere teachers adjust the learning objectives to the student's needs based on what is realistically achievable. IC Sovere's and the rehabilitation institute's staff exchange feedback on the student's

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[45]   To prevent the identification of the students involved in the programme, the name of this institute is kept confidential.

academic progress, devise a coordinated learning plan aligning pedagogical methods, monitor the emotional well-being of the student to identify causes of potential distress.

Crucially, the **cooperation with the medical-pedagogical services is conducted based on an inclusion approach for** *all* **students**. Students without disabilities visit the institutes too, to learn about their classmates' needs through activities such as tactile-sensorial workshops to simulate living with a visual impairment. The school coordinates learning activities with the rehabilitation institute using customised tools such as tactile books to help visually impaired students communicate with their classmates. It also organises regular meetings between the rehabilitation institute's neuropsychiatrists and students without disabilities to educate them on what life is like with a disability. Children are encouraged to write questions about their understanding of disability and any queries they may have about how to interact with their classmates with disabilities; specialists reply to help the class overcome the difficulties and fears about disabilities. Students and alumni with disabilities are also invited to share their experiences to help their peers understand their needs.

Success factors

In the absence of sufficient public funding and support, the success of the school's activities and its network of cooperation with local services relies primarily on:

- **Efficiency-driven management.** The school runs on corporate principles, with very strict budget management, but also devising financially self-sustainable activities, such as the sale of the herbal teas and the vegetables grown by the school's community in the school's garden.
- **Outreach-driven community support.** The school conducts numerous outreach activities to the local community, encouraging it to support the school through donations, fundraising, and volunteering.
- **Personal factors.** The school owes its success to the enthusiasm of highly motivated teachers, willing to

constantly experiment with pedagogical methods, and to the visionary attitude of its director.

Challenges & limitations

For a practice like IC Sovere to function in the context of decreased public funding and interventions, personal commitment and motivation is crucial, as is the willingness of teachers and administrators to work more than required: this comes with a real and recognised **risk of burnout for the staff involved.**

Practices like IC Sovere need funding to be able to hire enough staff, but also **require public authorities to take responsibilities in providing social and medical care** rather than relying on schools – as it increasingly the case in Italy – to act as surrogate providers of psycho-social services for children with disabilities.

(Potential) impact

IC Sovere does extensive data collection on students' welfare in general,[46] inquiring about overall satisfaction, motivation to study, stress levels, relationship with classmates and teachers, and approach to digitalisation, among some of the key indicators. Based on the latest surveys, **IC Sovere scores significantly better than the national average on all indicators**. In particular: nation-wide, on average only 12.95% of polled students are happy to attend their schools: at IC Sovere, this figure is 94.65%.[47]

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[46] Some Italian schools ask 6th and 8th graders to fill satisfaction surveys that are used to measure students' happiness and well-being in schools. IC Sovere takes part in this data collection process.

[47] Author's elaboration based on survey data. IC Sovere 2023. *IL BENESSERE DEGLI ALUNNI A SCUOLA Cosa ne pensano gli alunni delle "medie"?* Internal document provided by interviewed stakeholders.

The school and its inclusion activities' value are recognised by the local pedagogical community and attested by local society' supports through volunteering and fundraising. The impact of the school's approach is also confirmed by the **successful integration achieved by former students with disabilities in society and the job market**. The school uses existing projects of which it is a party to build "life projects" for students, for example **creating a community library** which now employs an alumna with intellectual disabilities.

IC Sovere collaborates with local public authorities, cooperatives and professional schools to ensure, though the creation of **professional workshops**, that their students and families are not left to fend for themselves upon leaving the school. For pupils with more severe disabilities, **collaborations are created with social services** to plan for further assistance after children leave compulsory education.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

A practice like IC Sovere's draws strength from being a **bridge between the school community, society at large, and local social services**. It can be an inspiring example for any educational institution that operates in a context where there are at least some social services for persons with disabilities of school age. The fact that it can survive in a context of limited funding suggests that the initiative can be replicated even in the absence of excessive funding. Many of the activities of the school, such as the outdoor ones, are **relatively low-cost or can even be financially self-sustaining**, making them highly replicable and scalable. However, appropriate support from public authorities is needed to give operational sustainability to the practice and avoid the risk of burnout for staffers.

Italy's post-graduate training programmes for support teachers: sustaining knowledge transfer through adaptability

Country: **Italy**   **Scale:** **National**   **Type:** **Policy**   **Year implemented:** **Since 2010s**   **Knowledge transfer:** **Intermediated**

At a glance:

This practice tackles the need to transfer knowledge in a coordinated, sustainable way to new generations of teachers, fixing issues that emerged during the early stages of Italy's transition to inclusive education.

The solution is a decentralised but standardised and holistic academic offer of specialisation courses, promoted by the Ministry of Education and offered at most Italian universities.

The courses ensure high-quality theoretical and practical training of professionals, thanks to cooperations between universities and schools.

Through the specialisation courses, up to 26,000 new support teachers are trained every year to assist an increasingly diverse growing population of students with disabilities.

Background

After its pioneering and radical adoption of inclusive education in the 1970s-1980s, Italy's educational system has faced two waves of challenges: early on, the issue was transmitting the expertise created in special schools over previous decades and guarantee quality training for support teachers (*insegnanti di sostegno*), the professionals assigned to assist students with disabilities. More recently, the challenge has become one of ensuring that support teachers can adapt to the changing educational context created by the increase in the number of students with disabilities, and the variety of recognised learning disabilities.

Italy's trajectory makes it a valuable learning ground to understand **the challenges of making knowledge transfer sustainable and continuous:** failure to establish systematic mechanisms to do so leaves the transition to inclusive education open to the risk of regression. Both the challenges Italy faced and the solutions it experimented with over the years can be of valuable inspiration for countries at earlier stages of transition.

During the early transition, schools often had to fulfil the new legal obligations[48] without appropriate resources to train support teachers, and **knowledge transfer was not systematically organised**. Special and general institutes spontaneously organised to work together, for example with shared laboratory activities. The first generation of support teachers emerged between 1977 and 1998 from a mix of former special school teachers and support teachers who had to go through training courses organised by private universities. These courses were initially of excellent quality but required a two-year commitment (too much for some aspiring support teachers) and were very expensive. Moreover, within the first decade, an

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[48]   See case study "Erickson: Italy's leading knowledge centre for inclusive education" for the legislative details.

unregulated market for training courses emerged, with some offering lower quality training at high cost. From the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education thus intervened to create a coherent, affordable, and nimble nation-wide training programme, which by the early 2010s acquired its current form.

Approach

Between 1998 and 2000, the Ministry of Education began organising training courses for pedagogical support activities for students with disabilities. In their first iteration, between 2000 and 2010, courses consisted of only 400 hours and had **insufficient pedagogical focus**, as participants were assumed to have gained enough pedagogical knowledge from undergraduate studies. This led to a decline in the professionality of support teachers, noted by families of persons with disabilities.

Reacting to the problem that had emerged, in 2010, the Ministry redesigned the courses[49] as **post-graduate programmes of one academic year** that teachers can take after completing their master's degree, with admission fees of around EUR 2,500-3,000. The Ministry raised the number of teaching hours to 1,400 (60 ECTS) and allowed specialisation by education grade: early childhood, primary, lower secondary or upper secondary. Yearly decrees adjust the courses' specifications, and thorough revisions of the programmes to adapt them to new circumstances are scheduled every ten years. The courses are organised by **gauging the regional need for support teachers** through consultation with school authorities of the country's 19 Regions and two Autonomous Provinces. The Ministry then instructs universities in each region to organise specialisation courses to train a corresponding number of support teachers. Universities have to demonstrate that they have the necessary infrastructures – including the necessary amount of **cooperation agreements with mainstream schools** to place trainees into internship programmes – to receive the Ministry's permission to hold the courses. The assessment process is repeated every academic year.

The courses teach a variety of skills and competencies. They have a strong pedagogical focus to the practical training of support teachers, but

also include medical aspects, and teach about the legal aspect of inclusive education. They train future support teachers to work based on Individual Education Plans,[50] designed around students' needs which are assessed according to the WHO's ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health).

The typical learning programme can partially vary by university but generally includes:

- 270-290 hours of **course activity in class**.
- 180 hours of **practical workshops**.
- 300 hours of **internship**. 150 hours are dedicated to "direct" internship in class, shadowing support teachers in their work. Another 150 hours focus on "indirect" internship, i.e., small-group meetings to reflect on educational practices and lessons learnt, as well as develop a learning module using assistive technologies (75 hours are set aside for this).
- 630-650 hours to prepare for exams, write a final dissertation to demonstrate theoretical and practical understanding, compile an end-of-internship report, and **create a multimedia product** aimed at special education with the use of communication and information technologies.

Success factors

As BA and MA pedagogical programmes to become general teachers do not include teaching programmes on inclusive education, these specialisation courses constitute a fundamental and flexible instrument to ensure schools have access to professionals trained in working with students with disabilities:

- The courses are **practical, affordable, and locally accessible** as they are organised in a decentralised way.
- They are also **accessible to persons who are already working as teachers** and want to specialise in inclusive education.
- Courses are organised to **fruitfully combine diverse forms of learning**, in a holistic and mutually reinforcing learning approach that

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[49] Implementing legal instruments: Art. 5 and 13 of Ministerial Decree n. 249 of 10/09/2010 and Decree of 30/09/2011.

[50] Personalised learning projects that schools are required to draft for each student with disabilities.

includes theoretical teachings, laboratory activities, and internships.
- ⋯ Furthermore, these courses **put technologies front and centre**. Trainees are taught to devise learning modules incorporating new technologies, as it allows to plan class activities to be **inclusive from the get-go**, instead of having to be adapted.
- ⋯ Lastly, **the Ministry adapts the courses to changing realities**. Interviewed stakeholders note that the Ministry is generally ready to listen to feedback from universities, schools and families and incorporate new principles.

Challenges & limitations

Admission to courses is regionally based, but graduates are not obligated to teach in their study region, leading to **potential shortages of specialists in certain regions**.

The current quality evaluation system of the courses relies on the yearly re-approval process and on students' satisfaction surveys; some stakeholders feel that **closer ministerial oversight could be beneficial.**

The Ministry is open to stakeholders' feedback, provided through a nationwide informal association of coordinators of courses, but the **feedback mechanism should be more systematic**, as the Ministry's political will to listen to stakeholders is undermined by the frequent government changes in Italy.

(Potential) impact

The specialisation courses **overcame the issues of previous systems**, allowing for the **mass training of specialists**: recent data indicates that in the school year 2021-2022 (the last one for which data is available), 26,000 new support teachers were trained through the specialisation courses.[51]

The trained specialists receive a **holistic coaching in all aspects of inclusive education**, including specialised didactical practices; psycho-pedagogical needs of persons with all forms of disabilities; handling of behavioural issues and class interaction; cooperating with parents, general teachers and staff of medical and social service providers; evaluating students' learning progress; incorporation of new technologies in teaching practices; ability to observe and evaluate students' functioning on the basis of the WHO's ICF classification.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

The courses' format can be easily copied, but it requires political will from public authorities to **invest in training of support teachers** and encourage **universities and mainstream schools to establish cooperation**.

The Italian model, however, has an important secondary implication: support teachers who complete these courses can move on to become general teachers and gain permanent employment. This makes courses highly desirable but ensures that **many alumni cease to work as support teachers after a few years**. Some experts and associations of families of students with disabilities are dissatisfied with the resulting turnover; other experts praise this, noting that **principles and imperatives of inclusive education are thus mainstreamed into all class activities** by teachers who have experience working with persons with disabilities.

When replicating such a practice, authorities should **consult with stakeholders and conduct research** to determine whether this secondary but important effect is desirable and useful for their local context, or whether measures (such as offering higher salaries to support teachers) should be put in place to prevent it.

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[51] ISTAT.2022. *L'inclusione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità | A.S. 2021-2022*. Available: https://www.istat.it/it/files//2022/12/Alunni-con-disabilita-AS-2021-2022.pdf

Ireland's pilot In-School Therapy Support Model to improve learning environments

Country: **Ireland**

Scale: **Selected 75 schools**

Type: **Practice (pilot)**

Year implemented: **Since 2018**

Knowledge transfer: **Intermediated**

At a glance:

Ireland's education system is highly dependent on the existence of special needs assistants, while occupational, speech and language therapies are usually delivered in clinical settings individually to students. Such practices do not complement the logic of inclusive education.

The In-School Therapy Support Model provides an alternative education-based approach to therapy, where the "client" is not the student but the school community.

The pilot project was funded by the Government and implemented by the National Council for Special Education. Selected 75 schools benefitted from the project by getting regular support from speech and language therapists and/or occupational therapists.

The model increases teachers' confidence in maximising inclusion, decreases the need for individually-delivered support measures and prevents various behavioural/learning problems from arising.

Background

In Ireland, special education provision in special schools or classes is still largely prevalent[52]. This requires a lot of financial and human resources; for example, there will be over 20,000 special needs assistants (SNAs) in the school year 2023-24.[53] To address this issue, Ireland is taking steps towards a more inclusive direction. In 2018, the same year when Ireland ratified the UN CRPD, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published an influential policy paper called the "Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme"[54]. The paper stated that the SNAs are doing a good job by meeting the care needs of students (e.g., toileting, mobility, feeding), but they should not be seen as "the answer to everything". The NCSE warned that there is a risk of schools and students becoming too dependent on SNAs as their principal source of support within the classroom. Moreover, SNAs are not necessarily appropriate for older students who wish to develop greater independence as well as socialise and learn with their peers.

Following the recommendations provided by the NCSE, the Government decided in early 2019 to establish a

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[52] In the school year of 2021-22, there were 2,118 special classes across schools, a 386% increase since 2011. They provided education for a record 12,700 pupils with autism, learning disabilities and other additional needs. More information available: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/5ee1f-minister-josepha-madigan-welcomes-a-record-number-of-new-special-class-places-as-students-return-to-school/

[53] More information available: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-11-08/623/

[54] NCSE. 2018. *Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme. A New School Inclusion Model to Deliver the Right Supports at the Right Time to Students with Additional Care Needs.* Available: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/NCSE-PAP6-Comprehensive-Review-SNA-Scheme.pdf

pilot of a new School Inclusion Model (SIM). SIM is testing a support model for schools that differs from the traditional SNA scheme and provides for a range of additional assistance, such as behavioural support, psychological support services and therapy services within the school. The activities revolve around building teacher capacity, augmenting SNA training, and assisting schools in building an inclusive culture.[55] One of the key strands of the SIM (and the focus of this case study) is the In-School Therapy Support model. The project aims to provide speech and language therapy and occupational therapy support within educational settings rather than the typical clinic settings. The In-School Therapy Support model was first tested during the 2018-19 school year and, due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, its funding has been extended until 2025.

Approach

In Ireland, therapy services have been standardised to a clinic-based model and are seldom provided in schools. Occupational therapists (OTs) and speech and language therapists (SLTs) are mainly employed by the Health Service Executive (HSE). In such service delivery models, children are typically added to a lengthy waitlist for a diagnostic assessment, followed by one-to-one sessions with the therapist. The therapist typically focuses on remediating the difficulties within the child rather than within their learning environment.[56] In many other European countries, in-school therapists exist, but they, similarly as in Ireland's case, tend to see students in small groups or individually in their own office rather than the classroom.

The In-School Therapy Support pilot does not seek to replace the existing medical model but rather complement it with a model where **the "client" is the school community, and the goal is the health and well-being of all the students in the school.** The model follows a multi-tiered approach to assessment and intervention called the "Continuum of Support" (see Figure 4), which is similar to the model in Finland. It moves away from traditional direct one-to-one models of remedial therapy provision and instead prioritises consultative collaboration services. With the guidance of therapists, each school has set up an inclusion team, typically consisting of a principal/deputy principal, members of staff that deal with special education and some interested teachers, as well as the assigned OT, SLT

and psychologist[57]. In line with implementation science principles, the team sets out the priorities for the school year based on its needs; adjustments and informal development of the process are also possible during the year. The SLTs and OTs work with school staff to help them support students in their classrooms and, occasionally, in small groups and individually. The therapists collaborate with teachers on how to support their students in developing speech, language and communication skills and participating in daily tasks (such as transitioning between classes, handwriting, concentrating, participating in sport, etc.). For instance, OTs and SLTs may advise teachers to incorporate Lego therapy or sensory circuits in their lessons or set up a no-chairs classroom (see Box 3). Some of their recommendations can apply to the whole school, such as adding visual aids across the school's facilities to help students with spatial orientation.

The model was tested in a diverse range of 75 schools (and, for one year, in 75 preschool settings) and ran from 2018 to 2023, with periods of disruption caused by COVID-19. During the year 2022-23, the NCSE

Figure 4. *Multi-Tiered Continuum of Support model*
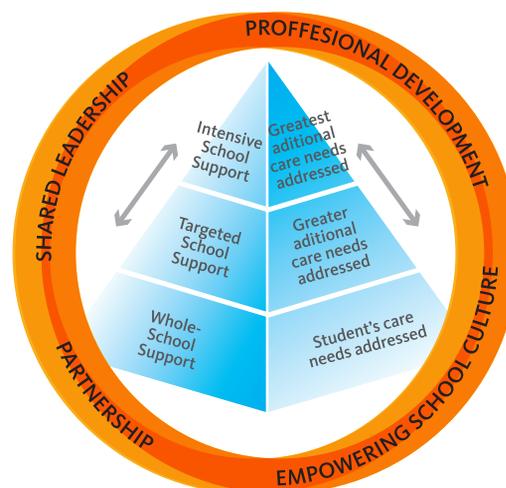
Source: NCSE. 2018. Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme.

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[55] NCSE. 2020. *Annual Report 2019.* Available: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NCSE-Annual-Report-2019-EN.pdf

[56] Lynch, H. et al. 2020. *Evaluation of In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project.* Available: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Demo-project-evaluation-final-for-web-upload.pdf

[57] Psychologists are employed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), a service within the Department of Education. See https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5ef45c-neps/

recruited 11 SLTs and three OTs to work on the project, although funding was available for 19 SLTs and 12 OTs (recruitment issues are described below). Since one therapist can cover around 15 schools, not all schools participating in the project had access to an OT.

> ## Box 3.
>
> ### Illustration of in-school occupational therapy support: No Chairs Classroom
>
> A rural primary school involved in the In-School Therapy project, had a number of classes with students presenting with a range or learning needs including ASD. The school had recently lost some of their SNAs and the administration and teachers were worried that the teaching process would be disrupted by the lack of assistants to support children with additional behavioural or emotional needs (often by withdrawing them from the classroom for periods of time). The visiting occupational therapist advised the teachers that such children do not have to be withdrawn from the mainstream environment (the classroom) to receive regulating sensory input. One of the teachers tried out a No Chairs Classroom activity – in the morning, the students would stack their chairs into a corner of the classroom. Eventually, the tables would be stacked away too. The children would do their learning tasks on the floor, sitting on a cushion and writing on the backs of tables. According to the OT, this activity supports the emotional and cognitive regulation of the students; the stacking of chairs and tables develops the children's communication skills and spatial awareness. Most importantly, it benefits not only the students with a recognition of SEN but also the whole class. The results were so successful that other teachers in the school started applying it too. The project team filmed the No Chairs Classroom process and is going to use the video for educational purposes in the future.

Sources: interview with an In-School Therapy Support project staff member (occupational therapist)

Success factors

Representatives of NCSE mention several success factors that are important for the in-school therapy support model to work:

- **Therapists and teachers are learning from each other.** The therapists work with the teachers not as experts but as partners – they do not give lectures to the teachers but rather deliver initial Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) events and then move on to support the teachers in implementing the new methods. The therapists then adapt their TPL content based on their learning from the teachers during the implementation activities.
- **Therapists are enabled to support children without seeing their diagnosis**. Typically, OTs and SLTs employed via health services are preoccupied with assessments of individual children and various administrative tasks, which takes a lot of time away from the therapy itself, whereas the education-based model enables them to work dynamically and effectively on Tier 1 interventions dedicated to the whole classroom.
- **The project team addresses the teachers' concerns in a timely manner.** The interviewed OT shares that their team met with one of the biggest teachers' unions. The teachers were initially concerned that the project would bring the medical model into schools; however, once the team explained that the model supports rather than burdens teachers, their concerns were addressed.

Challenges & limitations

The interviewees define a couple of key challenges and limitations concerning the project:

- **Recruitment issues.** There are not enough OTs and SLTs in Ireland to cover all the schools' inclusion-related capacity-building needs. In fact, parents sometimes have to wait more than a year to get a therapist's appointment via the HSE. Furthermore, since the in-school therapy support pilot is project-based and has to be annually renewed, the therapists are offered temporary one-year contracts, which are unattractive from a job security perspective. In the future, the NCSE hopes to offer permanent contracts to attract more therapists.
- **Shifting away from the medical model of therapy.** The project team shares that they had challenges "selling" the idea of education-based

therapy to teachers, school management, civil servants and even the therapists themselves. People tend to want "quick fixes" and are used to seeing therapists work with individual children in a deficit-oriented approach. Some found it difficult to grasp the concept of a long-term strength-based model of support aimed at changing the learning environment.

(Potential) impact

The first demonstration phase of the project that took place in 2018-19 showed some signs of impact, such as the educators' "**increased ability to identify early signs of special education needs** alongside **a sense of confidence** emerging in maximising inclusion of children with additional needs".[58]

- ••• The project team shares that creating a more inclusive school environment at Tier 1 naturally **decreases the need for individualised support measures** and **prevents various behavioural/ learning problems from arising:**
- ••• Based on preliminary calculations, the schools that participated in the pilot were less likely to request additional SNAs from NCSE. In Ireland, each school gets a "front-load" of SNAs annually (a predetermined number of SNAs based on a school's profile); if a school identifies a need for more SNAs, they can apply for an exception by the NCSE to allocate additional SNAs. Some 16% of schools in Ireland asked for this in 2022-23 versus only 3% of the schools that were participating in the pilot.
- ••• Over time, both the educators and the therapists have gotten more comfortable dealing with difficult cases through targeted Tier 2 and universal Tier 1 methodologies and interventions. The OT shares that in the first one and a half years of the pilot, the schools had 277 files opened to include specific students in Tier 3 (intensive school support). In the second part of the project, the number decreased to less than 20 files.

At the time of writing this case study in June 2023, the project team was awaiting a decision from government regarding an independent evaluation of the overall School Inclusion Model initiative, which should shed more light on its impact.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

After nearly five years of implementation of in-school therapy in the selected 75 schools, the project team is ready to move on to a new cohort of schools, given that financing from the Government is ensured until 2025. The therapists feel more confident and experienced after five years and have already developed various new research and practice examples. The team estimates that 2-year periods for intense OT and SLT support should be sufficient for a school. Although scaling up to the national level is not possible due to a lack of resources, the team plans to reach a larger number of educators across the country by disseminating success stories during conferences, training, seminars, etc.

Because of the intensive nature of the In-School Therapy model, the number of therapists that would be required for this model to be provided to every school in Ireland is not seen as sustainable (there are around 4,000 schools in the country). Not every school requires this level of support. Therapists have found that this level of intensive support tends to become less efficient in schools after they have received it for a sustained period of time (around two school years). The vision for a national education therapy service is that schools requiring In-School Therapy will be identified through a prioritisation process, and receive this support for a fixed period, which may be extended or shortened depending on the needs of the individual school. All other schools in the country will have access to nationally available, therapist-led training and follow-on support, delivered through NCSE regional teams. Regional team supports will be less intensive in nature and less staff-intensive.

The innovative practice or at least its principles can be applied in other contexts where the medical model of therapy is still considered the sole way of addressing the children's needs. Overall, education-based therapy models are becoming more popular worldwide.[59]

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[58] Lynch, H. et al. 2020. *Evaluation of In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project.*

[59] For example, there is a School-Based Occupational Therapy International Network; more information available: https://school-basedoccupationaltherapycurriculum.weebly.com/

Inclusion Ambassadors: pupils with additional support needs voicing their views on education in Scotland

Country:
United Kingdom

Scale:
National level

Type:
Policy & practice

Year implemented:
Since 2016

Scotland

Knowledge transfer:
Intermediated

Platform

At a glance:

While mainstreaming is at the centre of Scottish education policy, the additional support needs of children and young people are not always met.

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary school-aged pupils who regularly meet to discuss their views and experiences of education and contribute to awareness-raising, policymaking, and practical school-level changes.

The initiative is funded on a project-basis by the Scottish Government and is run by a national charity called Children in Scotland.

Through the Inclusion Ambassadors project, Children in Scotland creates a safe space for young people to share their views, which ultimately inform policy and practice. The project has inspired several similar local/school level initiatives.

Background

During the last two decades, increasingly more children and young people who are entitled to additional support attend mainstream education settings in Scotland. However, complex challenges of meaningful inclusion and meeting additional support needs remain.[60]

To ensure that the views of young people with additional support needs are heard in discussions about education policy, in 2016 the Scottish Government funded the establishment of Young Ambassadors for Inclusion (currently called the Inclusion Ambassadors). The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary school-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of school provision (including both mainstream and special schools). Currently, the group consists of 20 members from 17 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland who regularly meet online and in person to discuss their experiences of education. The Inclusion Ambassadors were originally delivered by Education Scotland (a government agency)[61], but since 2019 the group has been formally supported by Children in Scotland – a national charity working to improve children's lives, in close cooperation with the Government.

Approach

The Inclusion Ambassadors are involved in a range of activities to influence and improve experiences for pupils with additional support needs. They are enabled to do so through monthly meetings facilitated by professionals working with the children's sector, namely the project team – employees of Children in Scotland and Enquire (the Scottish advice service for additional

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60   Scottish Government. 2020. *Support for Learning: All our Children and All their Potential.* https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/documents/

61   The Scottish Government executive agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education.

support for learning, which is also managed by Children in Scotland). The activities include:

Responding to calls for consultations and other policy work. During their meetings, the Inclusion Ambassadors often discuss various education policy matters – in some cases, external stakeholders, including from the Scottish Government, attend these meetings in order to gather first-hand experiences of pupils with additional support needs. In 2021, the Inclusion Ambassadors created their vision statement (see Box 4) which helps policymakers and those working in education understand what young people with additional support needs value about school. In 2022, the Inclusion Ambassadors contributed to the National Discussion on Scottish Education, framing their response around the Vision Statement: they highlighted the importance of drafting and adhering to support plans, the need to better prepare pupils for life after school (teaching life skills vs solely academic skills), the need to effectively address bullying, as well as the need to provide wider ranges of opportunities (e.g., different types of sports during physical education classes) for pupils with additional support needs.[62] Recently, the Inclusion Ambassadors advocated for a more flexible approach to exams and assessments.[63]

Creating resources for education practitioners. This includes an Inclusion Ambassadors Pledge Pack, which can be used to reflect on the inclusion practices in one's

school and commit to improvement, a Language and Communication Guide, as well as a set of reflective questions to improve support for transition from school.[64] The project team also actively communicates about the group's activities via Children in Scotland's website through blog posts and podcasts.

Organising "Success Looks Different Awards". In 2022, the Inclusion Ambassadors, supported by the project team, designed these awards to encourage schools to

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Box 5.

"Success Looks Different Awards" winner – Secondary School Category (2022)

Alva Academy, a secondary school in Clackmannanshire, is a mainstream secondary school that also has a specialist ASD provision. The school promotes inclusion by organising Autism Acceptance Week, which is led by a pupil ambassador group. The ambassadors – students with ASD – deliver lessons to other pupils; one of the ambassadors also created a video for the school's community on the challenges of school life for a learner with ASD. Furthermore, the school celebrates Dyslexia Awareness Week, which also includes assemblies and videos made by pupils, as well as staff trainings on dyslexia (e.g., teachers undertaking dyslexia simulation activities). The Alva Academy also delivers a Wellbeing Award to recognise pupils for participating in opportunities to promote wellbeing. Pupil voice is embedded in the everyday practice in the school.

Sources: Children in Scotland. 2023. *Success Looks Different Awards: Sharing examples of supporting inclusion in schools.* Available: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/IA_SLD-Case-Studies_FINAL.pdf

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Box 4.

Vision Statement of the Inclusion Ambassadors

· · · School should help me be the best I can be.
· · · School is a place where children and young people learn, socialise and become prepared for life beyond school.
· · · Success is different for everyone. But it is important that all the adults that children and young people come in to contact with in school get to know them as individuals. They should ask, listen and act on what the young people say about the support that works best for them.

Sources: Children in Scotland. 2021. *Inclusion Ambassadors: Vision and overview.* Available: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA_Vision-Statement_Final.pdf

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62   Children in Scotland, Inclusion Ambassadors. 2022. *Let's Talk Education – Our National Discussion.* Available: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Inclusion-Ambassadors-National-Discussion-on-Scottish-Education.pdf

63   More information on the Inclusion Ambassadors' position on the Review of Exams and Assessments: https://reach.scot/inclusion-ambassadors/review-of-exams-and-assessments/

64   More information on resources created by and with the Inclusion Ambassadors: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Resourcebank_1page_Dec22.pdf

look beyond exam results and consider success in more than just attainment levels. In the 2023 edition of the awards, the Ambassadors decided to include separate categories for early years settings, primary schools, secondary schools, and special schools. The awards create a platform for schools to showcase that they are celebrating all pupils and have adapted whole-school approaches to inclusion (see Box 5 for illustration).

Success factors

The interviewed project team members of the Inclusion Ambassadors define several key factors for the participation to be meaningful and effective:

- **Ensuring a cross section of experiences.** Although the Inclusion Ambassadors are not considered representatives of their region/school, the project team seeks to ensure variety among the selected pupils in terms of local authorities, circumstances, and experiences. For example, the Inclusion Ambassadors include young people with ASD, young people with visual impairments, as well as interrupted learners – children and young people whose learning has been interrupted due to moving/deployment or health-related reasons.
- **Building respect and trust.** The team members emphasise that giving enough time to develop a positive atmosphere in the group and getting to know each other is important to make everyone feel comfortable to share thoughts, especially before delving into sensitive topics. At the same time, it is important to ensure that participation is optional and voluntary.
- **Allowing the group to develop their own agenda.** The adults (the project team) clearly communicate what the overall aim of the group is and act as facilitators to help support the group with their objectives. The pupils themselves define what is important for them to talk about. The facilitators do not have a strict agenda for the meetings and allow flexibility in terms of topics, approaches, and outputs.
- **Ensuring there is buy-in from authorities.** The project team strives to get the national and local authorities on board, not only to fund/support the activity but also to implement changes based on the Ambassadors' recommendations.

Challenges & limitations

The project team defines two main challenges:

- **Moving from listening to action.** While creating a platform for children and young people to have a say and in engaging with them on policy and practice development is already a big step forward, it can be hard to measure the impact this has on decision-making at different levels. The team are also aware of the gap between policy and practice: while they have evidence of what children and young people think works for them, this is not always reflected in the delivery of education.
- **Uncertainty about funding.** While the team have funding to deliver the work with the group, they believe longer term funding would support them to deliver the project even more effectively.

(Potential) impact

The Inclusion Ambassadors has been successful in **raising awareness** about additional support for learning across Scotland – each year, more students are applying to become Ambassadors; over 40 schools have applied to the "Success Looks Different Awards" in 2022; schools and local authorities are enquiring about establishing similar initiatives at their local level. The views of the Inclusion Ambassadors were **reflected in various policy documents**, including the national Additional Support for Learning Action Plan and the Review of Assessments and Qualifications. Children in Scotland uses the Ambassadors' ideas **to develop practical resources** for schools (however, the project team does not currently have evidence about how many schools are using them). Finally, the project team shares that the initiative has a **positive and even therapeutic effect on the pupils involved**. The team records whether the pupils enjoy coming, whether they feel included and if they have a chance to share their views. Over 2022, they have received 100% positive feedback from the pupils across all three indicators. Being an Inclusion Ambassador provides a safe space for them to come to and express their thoughts and feelings, builds their confidence, as well as improves practices at their school based on their feedback.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

The initiative can be easily replicated in other national and local contexts. Children in Scotland encourages local authorities and/or schools to establish similar initiatives themselves – in fact, several local- and school-level projects have already started. Moreover, the project team is aware of conversations about similar projects in other parts of the UK. They receive regular requests for advice on how to develop such groups and therefore created an openly accessible resource pack on meaningful participation and engagement of young people with additional support needs.[65] In the future, team also **hopes to scale up** the Inclusion Ambassadors to include primary school-aged children.

[65] Children in Scotland. 2022. *Meaningful participation and engagement of young people with additional support needs: A Resource Pack for Education, Learning & Support.* Available: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/IA_Engagement-Pack-22_July.pdf

CIRCLE: freely accessible resources to improve Scottish teachers' competence and confidence

Country:
United Kingdom

Scotland

Scale:
Regional

Knowledge transfer:
Platform

Type:
Practice

Year implemented:
Since 2005

At a glance:

In Scotland, the number of children with additional support needs in mainstream or typical community schools has grown significantly – from around 5% in 2005 to around 30% in 2022.

The CIRCLE Framework, consisting of manuals and tools, has been designed to improve the school staff's and supporting personnel's competence and confidence to include all children in the education process.

Education staff, health professionals and academics were involved in the development of the Framework, which was funded by the City of Edinburgh Council.

The collaboration resulted in easily accessible and practical resources that empower education staff to support all pupils, as well as encourage effective collaboration between school staff, parents/carers, partner services, and other agencies.

Background

Mainstreaming is a central pillar of Scotland's approach to education. In 2004, the Scottish Government adopted the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act[66], placing a duty on education authorities

to provide education in a mainstream setting unless certain exceptions apply. After the legislative changes, the share of children with additional support needs in mainstream schools grew significantly – from around 5% in 2005 to around 30% in 2022.[67] This increase somewhat reflects how children with additional needs are recorded, but nonetheless indicates a large rise in provision in mainstream schools in Scotland. In the 2000s, there was a large preponderance of theory and policy in the field of inclusive education, but a lack of research that develops, applies, and adds evidence on how support should be provided. Teachers were still having difficulties operationalising the concept of an inclusive school and understanding specific needs.[68]

Against this background, in 2005, a cross-discipline partnership, called *The Child Inclusion: Research into Curriculum, Learning and Education (CIRCLE) Collaboration,* was formed. The City of Edinburgh Council funded the partnership, involving researchers from Queen Margaret University and health professionals (such as occupational therapists and speech and language therapists) from the National Health Service. In consultation with education practitioners, the partners carried out extensive research which resulted

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[66] Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. Available: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp_20040004_en.pdf

[67] Scottish Government. 2023. Pupil census supplementary statistics. Available: https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/

[68] The full list of CIRCLE resources is available here: https://www.thirdspace.scot/circle/ and https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources/

in easily accessible and practical resources that empower education staff to support all pupils, as well as encourage effective collaboration between school staff, parents/carers, partner services, and other agencies. The main outcome of the CIRCLE Collaboration is a suite of resources, involving various strategies and assessments, tailored for early years settings (for 0–5-year-old children), primary schools (5–12-year-olds), and secondary schools (12–18-year-olds), as well as online training courses, a number of academic outputs, and a postgraduate teaching programme.

Approach

To develop and validate the resources, the CIRCLE Collaboration team included the reflections and ideas of hundreds of education practitioners and support staff, as well as feedback from learners and parents/carers. Combining academic evidence with practical feedback has allowed the research team to select approaches that are realistic, appropriate, and effective. Overall, the CIRCLE Framework follows a theory that inclusion is not only based on the learner's skills and abilities (as perceived in the medical model of disability), but on a combination of factors including also the physical and social environment, structures and routines within the school, and the learner's motivation (see Figure 5). This approach is reflected across the CIRCLE resources,[69] which include:

- **Manuals for teachers and other people working in and with schools and early years settings.** The manuals, developed for working with children of three different age groups, follow a staged system of support, with an initial focus on **the inclusive classroom** (universal level). These also contain examples of **supports and strategies** which are particularly useful for the education of children with additional support needs and disabilities (targeted level). This involves measures to support the development of attention and concentration skills, organisation and planning, motor skills, social, emotional and relationship skills, etc. The manuals include illustrative quotes from experienced education professionals: e.g., one teacher shares that they break up lessons into chunks and ask learners to mark off what they have done as they go on their individual plans to help maintain focus[70]. To

support measurement of progress, the manuals contain checklists and planning tools, such as the CIRCLE Inclusive Classroom Scale used for the whole class (see Box 6) and the CIRCLE Participation Scale used for individual learners. Lastly, in cases when targeted support by the teacher appears insufficient, the resources contain strategies for **effective collaboration** between education professionals, parents/carers, and partner services/agencies external to the school (therapy services, psychological services, specialist education services, social workers, school nursing services, etc.).

- **Manuals for speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists.** The Therapy Manuals describe in detail the key techniques which therapists use during intervention and explain, with practical examples, what the therapist can do to help the child develop or learn from these techniques in school.

The manuals are designed to strengthen whole school approaches but can also be used by individual practitioners wishing to improve their classroom setting or their support strategies for individual learners. Interviewed teachers described these manuals as easy to understand, navigate through, and adapt. For those who wish to get a more in-depth understanding of CIRCLE, **additional training options are available:**

- Education Scotland (the national body for supporting quality and improvement of learning and teaching in Scottish education) developed a **badged online learning module based on CIRCLE**.[71] Teachers can take the pre-recorded online course free of charge as part of their in-service professional training, at their own pace.

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[69] The full list of CIRCLE resources is available here: https://www.thirdspace.scot/circle/ and https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait/education-resources/

[70] CIRCLE Collaboration. 2016. Inclusive Learning and Collaborative Working. Ideas in Practice. Secondary School Resource (Ages 12-18 years). Available: https://education.gov.scot/media/raqp5dzk/circle-secondary-resource-int.pdf

[71] Description of the online course "Inclusion in Practice – The CIRCLE Framework: Secondary" and Inclusion in Practice: The CIRCLE Framework – Primary is available here: https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/index.php?categoryid=359

Box 6.

The CIRCLE Inclusive Classroom Scale (CICS)

The CIRCLE Inclusive Classroom Scale involves a summary score sheet to determine how inclusive one's classroom environment is at a given time in the school year, allowing quick identification of areas requiring attention. It provides a rating of how different aspects of the environment impact learners in the following areas:

- ••• The physical environment (availability of objects, visual supports, sensory space, adequacy of space, accessibility of space);
- ••• The social environment (empowerment, provision of information, relationships, support and facilitation, attitudes);
- ••• Structures and routines (decision making, routines, appeal of activities, expectations, activity demands).

Figure 5. Jigsaw diagram representing interlinked factors to support inclusion
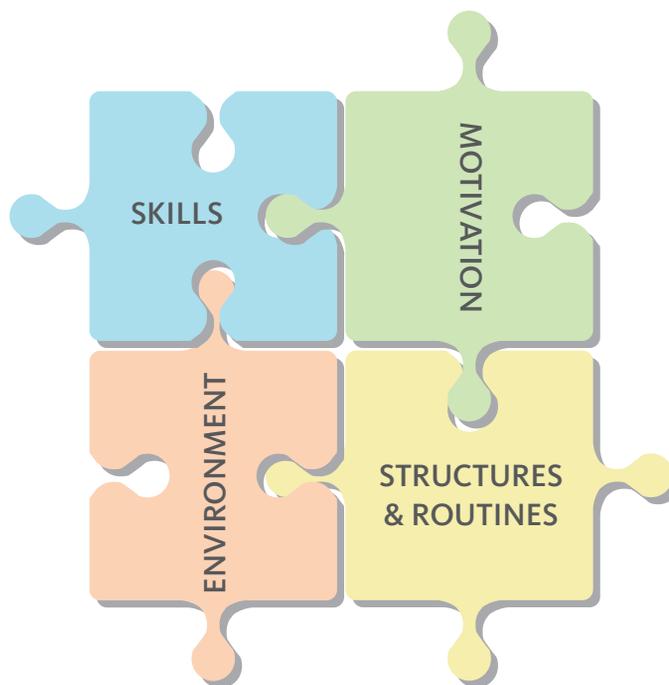
Sources: CIRCLE Collaboration. 2021. *Inclusive Learning and Collaborative Working. Ideas in Practice. Primary school resource (5 to 11 years).* Available: https://www.thirdspace.scot/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Primary-CIRCLE-Resource-2021.pdf

- ••• For ten years until 2022, academics at the Queen Margaret University ran a **formal post-graduate course** based on CIRCLE, called "Post Graduate Certificate in Collaborative Working: Education & Therapy". The course resulted in a post graduate certificate qualification, and particularly suited teaching staff undergoing their Professional Update,[72] as well as health staff.
- ••• The National Autism Implementation Team, funded by the Scottish Government, utilises the work of CIRCLE Collaboration, and has developed the **CIRCLE "Train the Trainer" resources.** These resources support the implementation of the CIRCLE Framework in local areas as one aspect of good 'universal' inclusive practice for children who may be neurodivergent. This includes written and pre-recorded materials for trainers (professionals from the local education and health services) delivering CIRCLE Professional Learning for school/early years staff, targeted towards improving experiences for neurodivergent learners.

Success factors

An interviewed researcher who took part in the CIRCLE Collaboration and two teachers who apply CIRCLE in practice mention several success factors that allow it to work well:

- ••• **Having local leads to ensure systematic implementation of CIRCLE.** Each school should have go-to persons (inclusion/CIRCLE champions, communities of practice, etc.) who promote the use of CIRCLE and onboard new staff members. If a school does not have such a role, the additional support for learning services (based within the local authority) can recommend establishing it.
- ••• **Reinforcing the idea that working with children of all abilities is the responsibility of everybody**

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[72]   In Scotland, teachers are required to undergo a Professional Update every five years, including professional learning.

(including classroom and subject teachers), not just 'specialists'. The leads who are implementing CIRCLE should aim to get senior leaders of the school and the local authorities on board, since their commitment to the idea can transpire to the wider school community; at the same time, those implementing the CIRCLE Framework should consult with all school staff to increase buy-in.

Challenges & limitations

The interviewees define a couple of key challenges and limitations concerning the CIRCLE Framework:

- **It is difficult to adapt CIRCLE in secondary schools.** Firstly, subject teachers tend to focus more on academic achievement than inclusion; secondly, teachers in secondary schools teach multiple classes and lack the time to familiarise themselves with the various needs of the students, and to communicate with other teachers/service providers about these individual needs.
- Despite formal adoption of CIRCLE in local authorities and schools across Scotland, **some schools are not using it systematically,** i.e., teachers may be using certain ideas from the manuals, but the Framework itself is not implemented as a whole school approach.

(Potential) impact

The CIRCLE Framework has been fully adopted across schools in several large local authorities in Scotland, including Edinburgh, East Lothian, and Midlothian, as well as in multiple other schools by individual headteachers and classroom teachers. The Framework has been shown to **improve teachers' competence and confidence** in terms of inclusive education. Previous research as well as the interviews for this case study show that the resources help teachers and related personnel think systematically about key issues relating to children with additional support needs/disabilities in the classroom.[73] The manuals give teachers ideas as to what to do next if a certain strategy does not work, help to guide staff through the referral process for

extra support, and in some cases prevent unnecessary referrals (Maciver et al., 2021). Teachers also report that the CIRCLE tools **provide clear and transparent documentation** about which strategies have already been used to support a particular child – this helps communicate with parents/carers who sometimes believe that teachers do not provide sufficient support for their children.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

There is no active funding underpinning the development of CIRCLE currently, as extensive effort has already been completed to support transfer of the CIRCLE resources to practice in Scotland, with a great deal of self-sustaining activity now underway. The CIRCLE tools, including the manuals, are freely available online[74], and are designed to be self-sustainable, requiring no significant additional investment from the school/local authority to implement them. For example, schools/authorities that want to implement CIRCLE in their communities can utilise the detailed "Train the Trainer" resources, freely available from the National Autism Implementation Team.[75] Meanwhile, individual practitioners can use the manuals for their work without undergoing any additional training. This proves especially useful for new practitioners who begin to encounter children with various additional support needs over time. The way the CIRCLE resources are designed creates opportunities for wider adaptation in Scotland, the United Kingdom, and other countries (funding to translate these resources may be necessary if English language manuals are not appropriate for the context).

[73] Maciver, D., Hunter, C., Adamson, A., Grayson, Z., Forsyth, K., and McLeod, I. 2019. "Development and Implementation of the CIRCLE Framework." International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 67(6), pp. 1–22. Available: https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912x.2019.1628185

[74] CIRCLE resources are available here: https://www.thirdspace.scot/circle

[75] "Train the Trainer" resources are available here: https://www.thirdspace.scot/nait

Portugal's special schools' transformation into Resource Centres for Inclusion

Country: Portugal

Scale: National

Type: Policy

Year implemented: Since 2008

Knowledge transfer: Direct

At a glance:

In 2000s, Portuguese policymakers started taking active steps to transpose the principles of the UN CRPD into national law and ensure that education is available for all children in their local mainstream school.

Most special schools transformed into Resource Centres for Inclusion, the staff of which work in mainstream schools, facilitating students' access to education. The technicians – psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and other specialists – can work directly with students in the classroom, individually or in small groups, or consult and advise the staff and parents/caregivers.

In accordance with the policy enacted by the Ministry of Education, the Resource Centres for Inclusion sign partnership agreements with schools and function within one or more schools within their area.

The policy allowed to bring virtually all children (at least 98.8%) into mainstream settings. The legal framework promotes a socially oriented and student-centred approach to education, although its full implementation is lagging in some regions and schools.

Background

In Portugal, most special schools were established by parents' cooperatives and associations, which, from the 1970s, were funded by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security. Since the 1990s, Portugal has been improving the conditions for pupils with SEN to access mainstream education and introduced a new role for special schools, namely, the role of Resource Centres for Inclusion (henceforth, RCIs). The process of reorientating special schools accelerated in 2006, when Portugal began transposing the principles of the UN CRPD into national law. Working together with parents' movements, the Ministry of Education established a Network of Resource Centres for Inclusion in 2008 and created laws envisioning the provision of education to all students in their local mainstream school.

In the year 2023-2024, 98 RCIs were accredited in the country[76], whereas only a few special schools continue to provide segregated education to around 400 children with significant disabilities or illnesses.[77] By 2013 virtually all children were integrated into mainstream school settings, however, an evaluation study of the model, carried out in 2015, revealed that a number of issues remained, including difficulties in resource allocation, the practice of "integration" instead of inclusion, as well as the persistence of the biomedical model of disability

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[76] The list of accredited RCI can be found here: https://www.dge.mec.pt/centros-de-recursos-para-inclusao-cri

[77] The latest data available shows that 984 students attended private special education schools in 2017/2018. Source: DGEEC. 2018. *Statistics on special education needs.* Available: https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/224/ According to the representative of Ministry of Education, the number stood at around 400 in 2023.

and the rehabilitation approach[78]. In light of these issues, new legislation (Law Decree DL 54-2018[79]) was developed in consultation with schools, teachers' associations and unions, parent associations, and disability rights advocates. Portugal's current policy framework for the inclusion of students with and without disabilities has been internationally recognised for its progressiveness[80].

Approach

Specialised support in mainstream schools may be provided by special education teachers and other professionals hired directly by the schools, or professionals linked to the RCI. The RCIs, which developed from former special schools, are "specialised services of the community, accredited by the Ministry of Education, which support and intensify a schools' capacity to promote the educational success of all pupils"[81]. They work in partnership with regular schools, facilitating students' access to education, training, work, leisure, social participation and autonomy. One RCI usually works with five or more schools (school clusters) in their area. The RCI teams are made up of *technicians*, namely, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, rehabilitation/physical therapists, sign language interpreters, and psychologists.

The **RCI technicians work closely with multidisciplinary teams**, which must be formed in each school, following 2018. The multidisciplinary teams are meant to support inclusive education, consisting of:

a) permanent members, i.e., a teacher who assists the director, a special education teacher, three members of the pedagogical council, and a psychologist, as well as

b) variable members related to the student being discussed (their teachers and technicians). In a 2019 amendment, parents and caregivers were also recognised as variable members of the multidisciplinary teams[82].

The multidisciplinary teams are required to adopt a holistic view, considering the academic, behavioural, social, and emotional aspects of the student, as well as environmental factors, such as the school and classroom settings. The teams' responsibilities include awareness raising of the educational community towards inclusive education, proposing learning support

measures and monitoring their implementation, as well as providing advice to teachers about the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices. This includes not only the preparation of individual education plans (IEPs) for students who need additional learning support, but also individual transition plans, if relevant (supporting the transition to post-school life is one of the major purposes of the RCI support).

Another innovative aspect of the 2018 policy framework is that it **seeks to eliminate labelling and categorisation**. The Decree-Law no. 54/2018 no longer uses the term "special education needs" and instead refers to the need for additional support. The Preamble of the document talks about "moving away from the rationale that it is necessary to categorise to intervene". It supports the idea that all students can achieve a profile of competences and skills at the end of their compulsory schooling, even if it requires differentiated learning paths. The pedagogical principles underlying the policy framework are based on **universal design for learning, flexible curricular models, collaboration, and a three-tiered model of intervention.** The law also stipulates that specialist support should preferably be provided within the classroom, rather than individually or for small groups of students outside the regular classroom.

On the other hand, students with specific disabilities (such as blindness or deafness) can be directed to reference schools, i.e., mainstream schools with additional provisions. Although students with these characteristics can attend any school, the dedicated

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[78] Directorate-General for Education. 2015. *Avaliação das Políticas Públicas – Inclusão de Alunos com Necessidades Educativas Especiais: O Caso dos Centros de Recursos para a Inclusão.* Available (in Portuguese): https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/estudo_cri_mar2015.pdf

[79] Decree-Law no 54/2018, July 6. Available (in English): https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/dl_54_2018_en_version_0.pdf

[80] OECD. 2022. *Review of Inclusive Education in Portugal.* Available: https://doi.org/10.1787/a9c95902-en

[81] Decree-Law no 54/2018, July 6, Article 18.

[82] Law 116/2019, Art. 4a, cited from Alves, I., Pinto, P., and Pinto, T. J. 2020. Developing inclusive education in Portugal: Evidence and challenges. Prospects, 49, 281-296. Available: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09504-y

reference schools have more human and material resources to respond effectively to their needs. For example, a reference school that is adapted for deaf students would have more teachers with specialised training in deafness, as well as specialised equipment in materials for visual support in learning. In such schools, the students with a particular disability form a larger share of the student population (e.g., 10-20%) than in other regular schools.

Lastly, under the new legislation, **the funding model for RCI services was simplified and made more flexible**. Previously, the student had to be diagnosed, and only then the school could allocate support to them from the RCI technicians. Moreover, the allocated CRI interventions were not always adequate in terms of type and duration, as they were based on generalised assumptions rather than individual needs. Therefore, the funding model was changed into a lump-sum model, where the Ministry of Education prescribes a fixed amount of money for each school's inclusive education purposes, based on the total population of the student body. The amount of funding is allocated based on an assumption that around 8% of the students will require additional support. The school, in consultation with the RCI, then autonomously decides how to best allocate the resources. Additional financing can be dedicated for equipping a student with assistive technology.[83]

Success factors

Based on the responses of interviewed stakeholders, several factors emerge as important for the successful implementation of the Portuguese inclusive education policy:

- **There is widespread acceptance towards inclusive education among stakeholders.** Since 2008, the Ministry of Education, despite political cycles and social pressure, has maintained a principal position that the UN CRPD needs to be followed, without allowing lengthy and vague phasing out periods for special schools. In terms of values, policymakers, parents/caregivers, and education practitioners now tend to agree that an inclusive education system should be built.
- **The social model of disability is embedded into an explicit legal framework.** This is reflected

in provisions such as: requiring RCI technicians to work in partnership with teachers and the multidisciplinary teams; getting rid of diagnostic labelling as a prerequisite to provide support; and introducing a lump-sum school funding model. However, **the practical implementation of these principles highly depends on each school-RCI partnership and especially the school's leadership.**

- **There is a strong emphasis on collaboration.** RCI technicians work within multidisciplinary teams, where parents/caregivers can also participate and co-design their children's school pathways. There is also growing awareness that the voices of students themselves should be heard more.
- **Education practitioners are used to work with a diverse body of students**, especially in terms of linguistic diversity and migration background. The representative of the Ministry shares that Portugal's student body comprises of 168 different nationalities.
- **The composition of the RCI teams is adequate for the provision of specialised support,** involving a diverse range of specialists.
- **The class sizes are relatively small.** In 2020, in public lower secondary institutions, there were 22 students per class in Portugal, compared to 23 students per class on average across OECD countries. If the class includes students who need additional learning support measures, its size can be reduced to 20 students.[84]

Challenges & limitations

Interviewed stakeholders, including parents/caregivers, agree that some of the issues that were identified during

[83] The issuing of assistive technology and dissemination of related knowledge depends on Information and Communication Technology Resource Centres, which are located within 25 schools across the country. More information available: EASNIE, 2020. *Country information for Portugal - Systems of support and specialist provision*. Available: https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/portugal/systems-of-support-and-specialist-provision (Accessed 4th of August, 2023).

[84] OECD. 2022. Review of Inclusive Education in Portugal. Available: https://doi.org/10.1787/a9c95902-en

an evaluation in 2015[85] still apply in 2023. Stakeholders view the current legislative model positively but mention several challenges related to its implementation:

••• **Some education practitioners and RCI technicians continue to follow a biomedical approach to disability.** Teachers are still resistant to work with children with complex needs/multiple disabilities in their classroom, while some parents are saying that attending to these children's needs will put other "typical" students at a disadvantage. Therefore, some professionals and parents/caregivers expect that the RCI technicians will provide individualised interventions from an essentially clinical perspective. Interviewed stakeholders emphasise a need for more awareness-raising and competence-building in school contexts to shift these attitudes and behaviours. However, there are already some positive examples of attitudinal change – a director of an RCI mentions noticing a trend that more teachers are seeing the RCI technicians as their partners and advisors and are becoming more willing to apply universal learning methods and classroom-based interventions.

••• **Stakeholders perceive current resources as insufficient and/or inadequately placed to meet the demand of specialised support provision within schools.** Scarce learning support resources of the schools and RCIs are being shared amongst large groups of students, reducing the number of hours of support per student; in some cases, students are left without support due to conflicting schedules of the technicians. In more remote areas, some RCI technicians have to spend a lot of time traveling between multiple schools. Interviewed parents of young people with SEN from the parent association Pais Em Rede shared that the lack of human resources to support such learners is especially stark in secondary education. Pró-Inclusão, the National Association of Special Education Teachers, considers it urgent that the service provided by the RCI cover more students, be of greater frequency and durability and, whenever possible, more systematic.

••• **Unequal status between RCI technicians and teachers hinders their teamwork.** RCIs are contracted partners of the schools, meaning that schools can act as gatekeepers: for example, the school leadership or teachers can disagree to apply certain interventions or prevent RCI technicians

from directly contacting parents/caregivers, according to a representative of one RCI.

••• **The education system puts too much emphasis on academic achievement.** As noted by Pró-Inclusão, success is still measured on the basis of preparation for higher education, which hinders the flexibility of educational processes that would best serve the different rhythms and learning capacities of students. According to interviewed parents, this issue becomes especially relevant when children with complex needs reach secondary school age and mainstream schools become reluctant to accept them.

••• **Transitioning between different levels of education and, especially, post-secondary school life is difficult for children and young people with additional support needs.** Even though multidisciplinary teams are required to develop individual transition plans for students who receive additional support measures, such students are faced with scarce vocational education and employment opportunities.

(Potential) impact

The work of RCI teams is recognised and valued by school management bodies, teachers, and parents/caregivers. The impact of the policy is overall positive – in 2017/2018, **98.9% of students were enrolled in mainstream schools**, while the remaining 1.1% of students (984 in total) were enrolled in private special schools[86]. According to the representative of Ministry of Education, the number continues to decrease and stands at around 400 in 2023. Moreover, according to an OECD report[87] on the Portuguese inclusive education system, **the level of completion of secondary education has increased significantly** during the last three decades. The upper secondary

[85] Directorate-General for Education. 2015. *Avaliação das Políticas Públicas – Inclusão de Alunos com Necessidades Educativas Especiais: O Caso dos Centros de Recursos para a Inclusão.* Available (in Portuguese): https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/estudo_cri_mar2015.pdf

[86] DGEEC. 2018. *Statistics on special education needs.* Available: https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/224/

[87] OECD. 2022. *Review of Inclusive Education in Portugal.* Available: https://doi.org/10.1787/a9c95902-en

out-of-school rate decreased from 17% in 2005 to less than 1% in 2019, the lowest rate among OECD countries. Portugal's 15-year-old students saw **significant improvements in their reading, mathematics and science abilities** as measured by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).[88] However, the progress is still varying between regions and schools – in some of them, the policy changes have not been matched by changes in the thinking and practices of many of the staff involved.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

Despite the issues mentioned above, stakeholders agree that the policy is worth to be adapted in other countries and **demonstrates a good example of how the student can be placed at the centre of the intervention.** Some stakeholders point out that the transformation of special schools into RCIs should be accompanied by clear guidance from the national-level authorities and include organisational changes at school and local levels. Many European countries are drawing inspiration from Portugal's example in their policy design (e.g., Serbia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Ireland), but most of them are envisioning longer phasing-out periods for special schools, to allow education and health practitioners to better prepare for their new roles. On the other hand, the representative of the Ministry of Education of Portugal believes that mainstream schools will always claim that they are "not prepared enough" to accept children with SEN and, instead, advocates for a decisive and full transition to an inclusive education system, even if such a reform is initially met with resistance.

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[88]   OECD. 2022.

Serbia's "We all learn together" project to improve the quality of inclusive education and support the transformation of the role of special schools

Country:
Serbia

Scale:
12% of schools nationally

Type:
Policy

Year implemented:
2021-2024

Knowledge transfer:
Direct

Intermediated

At a glance:

Serbian education system faces a growing need for additional support at mainstream schools and the political imperative to meet the principles of UN CRPD.

The EU is funding a project to increase access and completion of pre-university education for children with additional educational support needs in Serbia by, inter alia, establishing Resource Centres and by building the capacity of education professionals and other support specialists through trainings, mentorship and peer-learning.

The project, supported by the EU with a budget of EUR 4.78 million, is implemented by the Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF Serbia.

The project aims to ignite a systematic process of networking and resource-sharing between schools, communities, and other institutions in the area of inclusive education. Its activities will reach at least 12% of schools in Serbia and support the establishment of 10 Resource Centres.

Background

The concept of inclusive education has been introduced in Serbian legislation in 2009, through the Law on the Foundations of the Education System. Since then, the Law has been amended several times, with the 2017 edition[89] obliging the education system to provide equal access to education to all children, students, and adults, without discrimination and separation of any kind. The Law stipulates that all children have the right to participate in regular school programmes in regular schools, however, children with high support needs can still attend special schools[90] if the competent body (intersectoral committee[91] at the local level) recommends so and the parents give consent.

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[89] The Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2017) can be accessed here: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi_download/zakon_o_osnovama_sistema_obrazovanja_i_vaspitanja.pdf#

[90] Formally, special schools in Serbia are called schools for the education of students with disabilities.

[91] Intersectoral committees consist of representatives of the education sector, health sector and social protection sector, and is established on a municipal level. Their role is to assess the child's need for additional learning support, and to recommend support measures within the education, health, and/or social protection system. The enrolment of the child in the special school is not possible without the opinion of the intersectoral committee.

In relation to the Law, the number of children in special schools and classes has been consistently dropping, standing at 6,524 in 2020/21.[92] The growing need for support at mainstream schools and the political imperative to meet the principles of UN CRPD encouraged the Serbian government to establish a new role for special schools. In its Education Strategy 2030, Serbia recognised the need of the transformation of the role of special schools into resources of support to inclusive education. To support this goal, in 2021, the Delegation of the EU financed the three-year-long project "Improved equal access and completion of pre-university education for children who need additional educational support" (or "We all learn together"), worth EUR 4.78 million. Implemented by the Ministry of Education together with UNICEF Serbia, the project aims to reach at least 12% of the country's schools and build a basis for a more systematic approach towards inclusion.

Approach

Several strands of activities are planned throughout the course of the project. Firstly, the Ministry of Education is **establishing Resource Centres** in already existing education institutions, which would support children with additional learning support needs across the country. The Ministry has also adopted a Rulebook on the Resource Centre, detailing its functions. Any education institution may acquire the status of a Resource Centre; in practice, the role is mostly foreseen for special schools. In 2022, 10 schools acquired the Resource Centre status – nine of them are special schools, while one is a primary school for adults (e.g., students whose education process has been disrupted for various reasons). While some special schools were already providing support to mainstream schools for a few years, officially becoming Resource Centres will allow them to do it more systematically. The primary goal of their activities is **to help mainstream schools become more inclusive** and **increase the availability of additional support** for students and their families. This includes not only students with SEN and/or disabilities, but also students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and those at risk of early dropout, which is a significant issue in Serbia, especially among Roma children and youth. The experts at the Resource Centres will consult mainstream school teachers on issues such as developing individual learning plans or managing a diverse classroom. According to the Rulebook, the experts may work with children in the classroom (e.g., to teach them and the teacher/classmates how to use assistive technology), but they are not allowed to withdraw children with additional support needs from the class to provide segregated teaching. Five of the Resource Centres were also selected to become **assistive technology hubs**, which will conduct needs assessments, distribute assistive devices, as well as educate parents, teachers and children how to use them. For instance, one of the largest special schools in the country – ŠOSO Milan Petrović – has received various assistive technology worth around EUR 31,200 and had the staff undergo advanced training to prepare for their new role. A second procurement process is underway, which will equip the five Resource Centres with assistive technology products identified as most needed.

Capacity building of mainstream school staff, local officials, and supporting services is another strand of the project, consisting of a diverse group of activities:

- **Model institutions for inclusive education** will be selected to serve as examples of good practice and points of horizontal learning and know-how dissemination. Currently, six mainstream schools are candidates to gain the status of model schools; they have received grants to adopt whole-school innovative inclusive practices and develop the function of a know-how centre for other mainstream schools.
- A group of 20 municipalities will receive grants to build **local inclusive education networks**, encompassing diverse professionals, decision makers, parents, CSOs, and teachers. The networks will be coordinated by the municipalities and will serve to develop local inclusive education policy.
- Some 12% of schools in Serbia (200) are enrolled in **a comprehensive capacity building program on inclusive pedagogy**, encompassing three modules of trainings, mentoring support, horizontal learning and communities of practice. There are 81 mentors (professionals in the field of inclusive education) providing the training and mentoring support on the basics of inclusive education and

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[92] More information available: https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/education

differentiated teaching. The schools themselves are responsible for initiating horizontal exchanges, which are officially recognised as teachers' professional development in Serbia. With support from facilitators, the teachers work on a variety of topics related to inclusion, share experiences, and receive feedback from their peers. The project aims to enhance such peer learning activities in 60 out of the 200 schools – in each of the 20 municipalities directly participating in the project, three schools will form communities of practice. Furthermore, the candidate model schools for inclusive education will also be responsible for organising some of the horizontal learning events.

··· The project supports a **network of advisors-external associates**, who advise a wide range of mainstream schools in the area of inclusive education and other topics.[93] The network, deployed across the country, consists of experienced teachers, school psychologists, special educators, and external experts. According to UNICEF, this is already an active service – in the school year of 2022-23, 151 advisors-external associates provided over 1,600 visits and advisory meetings.

Finally, UNICEF is revising an **Inclusive Education Monitoring Framework,**[94] which was first developed back in 2015, introducing new in-depth indicators for municipalities to evaluate schools and monitor progress at their local level.

Success factors

While most of the project activities were only starting at the time of writing this report (there were delays due to Covid-19), a representative of UNICEF already notices some positive aspects in the project's design and its initial implementation phase:

··· The schools that are becoming Resource Centres are **keen to undertake the additional role** and become more open. However, it is important for the schools to re-organise their activities, shifting the focus from education provision to small groups of children (most special classes have up to 4 children) towards support provision in other education institutions.

··· The model schools provide a good way to promote what can be done: other education practitioners

will see **the model schools as positive examples of inclusion**, as opposed to thinking about inclusion as "a problem" that needs to be solved.

··· The **peer-learning networks** for education practitioners are already creating progress in adopting inclusive practices in the participating schools.

Challenges & limitations

The implementation of the project is challenged by several factors:

··· **Political fluctuations** (elections, re-elections) **are slowing down the legislative process in Serbia,** which delayed many project activities, according to the UNICEF representative. Moreover, recent tragic events – mass shootings, one of which occurred in a school – has been a source of great distress for education staff and the education system as a whole, postponing some of the activities.

··· Some of the **mainstream schools' staff have negative attitudes towards inclusive education**; pedagogues in one of the Resource Centres (ŠOSO Milan Petrović) notice that mainstream school teachers tend to be especially reluctant to work with children with multiple disabilities and complex support needs.

··· **Municipalities display different levels of development and motivation**. The project team at the Ministry and UNICEF is putting a lot of effort to motivate some of the local authorities to take the responsibility of coordinating the area of inclusive education. Various stakeholders often see the Ministry as the sole institution responsible for this area.

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[93] Advisors-external associates provide different kinds of support to education institutions: thematic support related to the subject teaching; support in the area of prevention of violence and discrimination; support to education in minority languages; support to democratic culture in the education institution; and support to inclusive education.

[94] More information on the Monitoring Framework available: https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/reports/monitoring-framework-inclusive-education-serbia

(Potential) impact

The "We all learn together" project aims to cover a minimum of 12% of schools through **strengthening the competencies** of 4,000 experts from education and other fields, as well as about 1,000 professionals from all intersectoral committees and 20 municipalities in Serbia. According to UNICEF, 90% of professionals who already participated in the trainings reported an increase of capacities. The participants find peer learning activities especially helpful.

Another important impact, as seen by the Resource Centre employees, is that the project will create new **more efficient working procedures** and functional links between the Resource Centres and mainstream schools. Moreover, networking between the Resource Centres will enable a faster response when the need for assistive technology arises in a particular school (Resource Centres across the country will be able to rent out assistive technology devices from one another, if the existing equipment is not sufficient).

Opportunities for scalability & replication

The project aims to adapt well-recognised European policies and practices of inclusive education (e.g., the Portuguese model of Resource Centres for Inclusion) to the Serbian context. The project is supposed to be finalised in May 2024; however, the Ministry of Education and UNICEF are planning to extend its duration. However, the sustainability of the project **highly depends on the availability of financing** once the EU-funded project ends. The Ministry has commissioned a feasibility study on the financing of inclusive education, which will help to create a vision as to what should happen to enhance inclusive education, including the questions of support services, transformation of the role of special schools, intersectoral funding, local level funding, and the model of school financing.

Reversing trends, addressing failures: *Pôles territoriaux* (Territorial Poles) in the French Community, Belgium

Country:
Belgium,

French Community

Scale:
Regional

Knowledge transfer:
Direct

Type:
Practice

Intermediated

Year implemented:
Since 2022

At a glance:

Pôles territoriaux (PTs) were set up in 2022 to address long-standing delays and shortcomings in the promotion of inclusive education in the French Community in Belgium.

PTs are institutional networks connecting mainstream schools and special schools to allow the systematic transmission of knowledge and expertise to mainstream schools.

PTs give schools access to specialised staff, bridging a knowledge gap that previously left mainstream schools without the tools needed to provide reasonable accommodation.

PTs' advice and direct intervention allows mainstream schools to fulfil their obligations under reasonable accommodation law, which up to now had remained largely unimplemented.

Background

The Belgian education system is **highly decentralised, with limited federal oversight** on the decisions of

schools and parents. Most details, including funding and priorities for inclusive education, are left to the three Communities (French, Flemish, and the much smaller German), which hinders the nation-wide promotion of inclusive education. Priorities are implemented through "circles" or "networks" (*reseaux* or *netten*) of public schools within the communities, responsible for pedagogical decisions. Networks include schools operated by the communities themselves; schools operated by Provinces; and Catholic schools, by far the largest network in the French and Flemish communities.[95]

Despite ratifying the UN CRPD and passing an Integration Decree in 2009,[96] Belgium still allows segregated education: its growth in the last decade has caused criticism from human rights watchdogs, who lodged a formal complaint at the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR). This resulted in a 2021 sentence which recognised violations of Articles 15.1 and 17.2 of the European Social Charter and **singled out the French Community**'s failure to ensure inclusive education for **children with intellectual**

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[95] See for figures: https://enseignement.catholique.be/; https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/engels. Despite the name, schools in the Catholic network are not privately-run by the Church.

[96] Ministry of the French Community 2009. *Décret portant des dispositions en matière d'enseignement spécialisé et d'accueil de l'enfant et de l'adolescent à besoins spécifiques dans l'enseignement obligatoire.* Available: https://etaamb.openjustice.be/fr/decret-du-05-fevrier-2009_n2009029183.html

disabilities.[97] A law on reasonable accommodation was belatedly approved – and patchily implemented – only in 2017.[98] Partly in response to criticism and to address territorial inequalities in inclusion rates,[99] the French Community has launched a **programme of reforms** to improve inclusive education without closing special schools, but moving to de-segregate them.

Approach

To address the issues flagged by the ECSR, the French Community created **48 Territorial Poles** (*Pôles territoriaux,* henceforth, **PTs**), territorial networks of special and mainstream schools whose task is to **institutionalise mutual cooperation** and **ensure the implementation of the reasonable accommodation decree**. The decision was taken with the 2021 Pact for Excellence in Teaching[100] through participatory consultations with parents' associations, labour unions and schools. Implementation begun in Sept 2022.

PTs are expected to advance the CRPD's goal of ensuring access to free compulsory education through the general system **in the community where pupils live** through **reasonable accommodation**. To do so, PTs:

- Promote cooperation and liaise between special and mainstream schools;
- Inform, train and assist mainstream schools about reasonable accommodation requirements;
- Promote their implementation by aiding with the development of personalised support systems;
- Collaborate with territorial providers of medical, psychological and social services;
- Support SEN students in mainstream education and towards their permanent integration;
- Support educational teams in assisting SEN students;
- Identify and disseminate educational tools for SEN students.

Each PT covers a population of at least 12,300 students. They receive public funding destined for staff (80%) and operating grants (20%). Their staff and funding are proportionate to the population of students with disabilities. Opinion 73.540/2 of June 21, 2023, of the Council of State[101] clarified the operational funding and mandate of PTs, equalising the per capita funding

across the networks within the community, and setting a clearer mandate for PTs to provide services to **facilitate the inclusion of students with severe mental disabilities**.

Funding is increased for every student who transitions from special to mainstream education, providing an additional incentive to promote inclusion. Each PT is **organised around one or more existing special schools**, one of which functions as headquarter for the PT; mainstream schools cooperate with the special schools via the PT, which is responsible for providing integration services and assisting mainstream schools in the provision of reasonable accommodation. Before the creation of PTs, **mainstream schools did not have enough training** on how to accommodate students with SEN, leaving the Reasonable Accommodation Decree ignored, and resulting in students with disabilities being moved to special schools.

Crucially, all **mainstream schools are compelled to establish relations with a PT** by signing **permanent contracts**, with which they can access support services from any special school networked in the PT. This, combined with the fact that mainstream schools

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[97] Inclusion Europe. 2021. Belgium condemned - Inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities. Available: https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/complaint-ceds-inclusive-school-2021/

[98] Reasonable Accommodation Decree of 7/12/2017.

[99] Leblanc, P. A. 2022. *From integration to territorial centers through reasonable accommodation*. EASNIE internal document, 17 May 2022. Provided to the authors.

[100] Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence (See in this regard: RTBF. 2022. *Réforme des pôles territoriaux : Inès dénonce une rentrée compliquée pour sa fille en situation de handicap*. Available: https://www.rtbf.be/article/reforme-des-poles-territoriaux-ines-denonce-une-rentree-compliquee-pour-sa-fille-en-situation-de-handicap-11059088

[101] Council of State of Belgium 2023. *CONSEIL D'ÉTAT section de législation avis 73.540/2 du 21 juin 2023 sur un avant-projet de décret de la Communauté française 'visant à adapter la législation à la suite de la création des pôles territoriaux chargés de soutenir les écoles de l'enseignement ordinaire dans la mise en oeuvre des aménagements raisonnables et de l'intégration permanente totale'*. Document provided by interviewed stakeholders.

cannot refuse enrolment to students with disabilities,[102] reduces schools' freedom to shy away from their obligation towards inclusion.

Once it has signed a cooperation contract with a PT, the mainstream school is required to define **individual, specialised agreements with the PT for every student with a disability diagnosis that enrols:** the agreements specify the school's obligation and the PT's contribution in providing reasonable accommodation to the student. This ensures that mainstream schools have access to the resources they need to provide reasonable accommodation, and have a stable support channel, as the PT advises on what is needed, reasonable, and feasible for each student. As part of the agreement, PTs also mediate between mainstream schools and parents to define what can be realistically achieved in terms of inclusion.

PTs dispatch multidisciplinary teams specialised in disabilities and learning disabilities,[103] including support teachers, speech therapists, psychomotor specialists, nurses and psychologists to advise mainstream schools' teachers, but they can also send support teachers on top of those already working in the school or provide extra teaching time directly. PTs' support, at least in its advisory form, is always available. Assistance in the form of support teachers is mainly provided for primary schools, whereas secondary schools mainly receive support from medical specialists and reasonable accommodation experts. PTs determine the composition of the intervening team based on an assessment of needs, but mainstream schools can require specific types of professional support at the signing of contracts: this system guarantees flexibility, as PTs and mainstream schools co-decide on the type of help needed.

Professionals sent by PTs work at the mainstream school but are formally employed by, and responsible to, the staff of special schools that are part of the PT: this ensures that **they cannot be used at the mainstream school's discretion to "fill gaps"**, as sometimes happens in other European countries where support teachers are used to cover for other teachers: PTs' teachers can instead dedicate their entire working time at mainstream schools to assisting students with disabilities.

Special schools that are part of the PT also ensure the **professional standards** of the pedagogical, medical,

and psychological staff dispatched: PTs' intervention thus ensures a constant transfer of knowledge between the two fields, with special schools and their staff effectively becoming **advisors and providers of practical aid for mainstream schools.** Special schools are expected to **turn into resources centres** for mainstream schools, and into **highly specialised institutions**, working only with students with very significant disabilities, especially behavioural and intellectual, that mainstream schools still cannot effectively include.

Challenges & limitations

On a philosophical level, PTs operate on the principle of gradual change, rather than radical transformation, though in recognition of the fact that the previous system needs to change. The reform process is expected to be fully implemented with school year 2025/2026, and there are concerns that **in the transition period to the new system, some students may remain with insufficient support.**[104]

Another philosophical problem is that currently PTs operate on the basis of a **diagnostic model of disability**. Although this is not a medical diagnosis, in practice most actors understand the diagnostic model as a medical model. Thus, the Higher Council for Teaching to Students with Special Needs intervened on this issue in an opinion of 2023,[105] which lays out a detailed roadmap for moving from diagnoses to a **competency and functioning profile, based on needs assessment rather than diagnostic labels**.

[102] Avis n°3, Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence, objectif stratégique 4.3. P 244

[103] Belgian law classifies learning disabilities as separate from other forms of disability. See Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. 2022. *Les pôles territoriaux.* Available: https://pactepourunenseignementdexcellence.cfwb.be/mesures/les-poles-territoriaux/

[104] RTBF. 2022.

[105] Higher Council for Teaching to Students with Special Needs. 2023. *Avis 158 : Du diagnostic à la pratique de classe : un itinéraire à construire vers une école inclusive.* Document obtained from interviewed stakeholders.

On a structural level, a key limitation is that **the French Community has not, as of yet, considered a revision of the teaching curricula** to adapt them to be inclusive of pupils with intellectual disabilities, as the Flemish community already did. Although not the PTs' fault, this issue does leave them with fewer tools to help this group, for whom "inclusion" is likely to remain limited to the current practice of using segregated classrooms.[106]

On a practical level, existing **legislation does not fully clarify PTs' role in promoting inclusion in extracurricular activities, such as excursions.** Schools can and do address PTs to seek advice to make them inclusive, but it is unclear whether it is the school or the PT's responsibility to provide reasonable accommodation and care in these circumstances. As of now, PTs staff accompanies classes in these activities only on a voluntary basis.

Success factors

PTs are a significant break with long-standing practices that hindered inclusion and are organised to leverage on the knowledge developed in special schools while enabling their transformation into knowledge centres. The most important contributions they bring to inclusive education in Belgium are:

- **Territorial presence** and **continuing accessibility**, allowing students to gain support in their own community, and enabling mainstream schools to access qualified help on a reliable basis;
- **Strict legal obligations**, imposing clear requirements on mainstream schools and minimising the negative effect of excessive school freedom, which previously hindered inclusion;
- **Multidisciplinary composition of intervention teams**, which include both medical and pedagogical experts;
- **Professionalism,** guaranteed through the involvement of special schools in the work of the PTs.

(Potential) impact

PTs' effectiveness is expected to become apparent over the next years, but impact metrics are already available: the **number of students** followed by PTs can be measured by looking at the number of individual agreements signed between PTs and mainstream schools, while the **overall effectiveness** can be assessed by comparing the number of students in special versus inclusive education. As of now, the reform's promoters note a rise in the number of students with more severe disabilities in the secondary cycle.

Opportunities for scalability or replication

The model of the PT strongly suggests that in the presence of sufficient political will, **countries with a long history of segregated education can move towards inclusion**. As they are centred on the cooperation between special and mainstream schools, this knowledge transfer practice can offer a useful model for other countries in **early stages of transition to inclusive education**. The allocation of appropriate funding is a prerequisite to make sure that this practice can function in other contexts, too.

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[106] See Inclusion-ASBL. 2022. *Pôles territoriaux: élèves avec un handicap intellectuel, circulez!* Available: https://www.inclusion-asbl.be/actualites/poles-territoriaux-eleves-avec-un-handicap-intellectuel-circulez/

Knowledge centres in practice: *Zentrum für Förderpädagogik* (Centre for Special Education), German-speaking Community, Belgium

Country: **Belgium,**

German-speaking Community

Scale: **Regional**

Knowledge transfer: **Direct**

Type: **Practice**

Intermediated

Year implemented: **Since 2009**

At a glance:

The Zentrum für Förderpädagogik (ZFP) was created in 2009 as the main measure of Belgium's German-speaking Community to ensure implementation of UN CRPD provisions in education.

The ZFP is a semi-autonomous entity running a vast range of services, from schools to support services, to a competence centre providing training and support measures to mainstream schools.

The ZFP pursues incremental promotion of inclusive education through open communication with mainstream schools, geared to identify and address their most pressing needs.

The intervention of the ZFP has led to a dramatic increase in the number of students with disabilities in mainstream education while preserving employment of special schools' staff.

Background

As described in the previous case study, Belgium's highly decentralised education system has been the subject of frequent criticism by human rights watchdogs and courts, due to its belated progress in inclusive education. Academic literature and media attention on this issue, however, tend to focus on the two largest communities (Flemish and French), leaving the experience of the much smaller German-speaking Community, which independently administers nine municipalities of around 78,000 inhabitants within Wallonia, out of focus.

The German-speaking Community does not task mainstream schools with providing services for pupils with SEN but expects them to **create a learning environment suited to include them**. The Community boasts more effective measures than the French and Flemish communities' to **promote public awareness of SEN among the general public**, and devised practical measures to ensure that mainstream schools can rely on a **network of support** to deliver inclusive education.[107]

In this context, the **Centre for Special Education** (*Zentrum für Förderpädagogik*, henceforth, **ZFP**)[108] was created, with funding from the Community. The ZFP originated in 2009, initially as an administrative **merger of the five special schools operating in the**

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[107] Van Kessel, R. et al. 2019. "Autism and family involvement in the right to education in the EU: policy mapping in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany". *Molecular Autism* 10:43, pp. 1-18, p. 13

[108] "*Förderpädagogik*" is variously translated across the literature as "Special", "Remedial" or "Adaptive" education.

Community's territory, later developing into a centre **tasked with promoting mainstream schools' efforts to ensure inclusive education**. As of now all but one of the Community's special schools are part of the ZFP, with the last scheduled to join in 2024.

The creation of the ZFP was a gradual process that started with the improvement of professional standards in special schools, which until then had been underfunded and geographically segregated to the edge of towns, and later developed into explorations of how special schools could advise and accompany mainstream schools. The ZFP operates above the school level, and below the Community's governmental level, but with the ability to **work directly and independently with schools**, across all of the existing school networks.[109] Now based across three locations (in the towns of Eupen, Bütgenbach, and St. Vith), the ZFP is the Community's key measure for the **implementation of the UN CRPD in education**.

Approach

The ZFP operates two connected services: schools, and a competence centre with integration services, all working on the basis of the principles of "campus" and "cooperation".

The **"campus" principle** informs the first area of the ZFP's work: **de-segregation** and **mixing of schools.**

Legal provisions in the German-speaking Community now forbid the relegation of special schools to peripheral areas and require that special and mainstream schools share facilities. Accordingly, the ZFP embarked upon a major programme of infrastructural development and adaptation to create campuses, where **special and mainstream schools operate shared spaces**, and are in the process of moving towards all-out physical merger of schools, while allowing them to remain administratively separate.

The ZFP campus principle centres on **shared classrooms** for pupils with and without SEN/disabilities: Teachers are granted considerable **pedagogical freedom**, as long as they subscribe to **open pedagogy principles**;[110] **co-teaching** is consistently practiced to ensure that the main teacher

and the support teacher for students with SEN/disabilities work together, to prevent the development of in-classroom *de facto* segregation.

Students still conduct some activities separately: even in the most closely integrated campuses organised by the ZFP, separate classes for children with very severe disabilities can operate during part of the hours, with the support of highly specialised teachers, educators and paramedics trained to address the needs stemming from specific types of disabilities. However, separate activities are kept to a minimum: of the 400 students in the ZFP's "spearhead" campus, only 1% attend separate classrooms, and only for part of the teaching time, while all breaks, workshops, and other classes are attended jointly with all students.

The **"cooperation" principle** is embodied by the ZFP's **activities in mainstream schools**. The ZFP engages with all mainstream schools in the community.

These started with the provision of **integration services**, such as accompanying to students with disabilities in mainstream schools: special school staff would be dispatched by the ZFP to assist mainstream schools in case they experienced issues with individual students. Schools are free to decide how to use the dispatched staff, but the ZFP reserves the right to **advise mainstream schools** on how to use it.

The ZFP's staff soon realised that simple integration services would not be enough to ensure full inclusion, as they created a dependency on "on-demand" help, whereby instead of attempting to proactively address the needs of their students with disabilities, mainstream schools would wait for special schools' staff to come and help. To address this issue, the ZFP set up a **competences centre** to provide **individual**

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[109] For more on the mechanism of school networks in Belgium, see the "Background" section in the previous case study.

[110] Open pedagogy is defined as ""the practice of engaging with students as *creators of information* rather than simply consumers of it. It's a form of experiential learning in which students demonstrate understanding through the act of creation." (our italics). University of Texas. 2023. *Introduction to Open Pedagogy*. Available: https://libguides.uta.edu/openped/intro. In the ZFP's practice this means activating pupils through their active participation in the creation of knowledge.

or groups training to mainstream teachers, as well as **consultancy for schools on reasonable accommodation**, strengthening schools' in-house capacity to cater to students with disabilities and overcoming the tendency to delegate the care of students with disabilities exclusively to the support staff sent from special schools. The ZFP engages with mainstream schools directly, **openly discussing with them to identify their needs**, and tailors accordingly its offer of integration services, teachers training and consulting based on a **customised approach** (See Box 7 and Box 8 for practical examples).

Box 7.

Adjusting teaching programmes in a technical school

An example of the approach of the ZFP's competence centre can be seen in the support it provided to a local technical secondary school, which was struggling to include students with disabilities, as well as other students at risk of social marginalisation. As a result of these issues, the school gained a bad reputation among the community. The ZFP intervened helping the school by **adjusting teaching programmes** (instead of allocating a fixed number of support hours per students): this led to the creation of differentiated diplomas created on open pedagogy programmes and free choice of courses, as well as **personalised learning projects** for each student. This resulted in an improvement of the school's pedagogical performance, turning into an attractive option for parents of children with disabilities who know that the school's pedagogical practices are now adapted for inclusion.

Sources: Interview with ZFP director Dirk Schleihs

Cooperation with mainstream schools is based on **contractual obligations and monitoring mechanisms**, wherein the ZFP and mainstream schools define **yearly requirements for the latter** to ensure progress. Crucially, contracts require schools to set aside allotted time for meetings with the ZFP to discuss the school's and the students' needs, and identify the best way to address them, thereby institutionalising mutual communication between the two parties. Contractual obligations can be used

Box 8.

Class mergers and co-teaching in a primary school

The ZFP assisted a bilingual primary school with around 11% of students with disabilities. The school was supported by encouraging **structural changes to its pedagogical practices**, instead of simple accompanying services: the ZFP was allowed to set up a programme merging two classes with their respective teachers, adding one ZFP specialised teacher, and one speech and language therapist (or rehabilitation therapist, depending on needs) to assist the activities of the macro-class, which begun operating through **co-teaching** as standard practice.

Sources: Interview with ZFP director Dirk Schleihs

to create cooperation projects in which mainstream and special schools' teachers work together for the mainstream school, but the ZFP gains the right to train mainstream teachers, intervene in crisis situations, and monitor quality of interventions.

Challenges & limitations

An obvious limitation of the ZFP's activities is its **gradual, incremental nature**, which distances it from more radical practices of full inclusion such as some of those introduced in Southern and Northern Europe. However, as the following sections will illustrate, this can also be a positive aspect in certain contexts.

Although mainstream schools across the community have registered a clear improvement in their capacity to absorb the demands of students with disabilities, the ZFP's interventions have been **less successful for students with very severe disabilities**, who remain in the care of special schools.

Another limitation is that some extracurricular activities such as class fieldtrips are considered to fall outside of the scope of inclusion. Students with more severe disabilities are therefore excluded from them; this policy is not expected to change for the time being.

Lastly, secondary school students do not receive a proper school-leaving certificate. This in turn has consequences for life after school, which severely limits their choices regarding the labour market. In particular, students with behavioural problems experience this as a limitation and challenge.

Success factors

The ZFP's promoters recognise that operating in a small autonomous community, **feedback is immediate**: as "everybody sees everything" in a community where there are few degrees of separation between schools and higher levels of decision making, policies and interventions can be quickly judged to be effective or not before prolonged processes of nation- or region-wide data collection are completed.

Furthermore, **ZFP operates vastly autonomously**, which allows it to operate flexibly in its direct interaction with schools, freely adjusting practices and interventions based on needs. This is made possible by a broader, institutionalised practice of **open communication with mainstream schools**.

The ZFP also fosters a wide network of **transnational cooperations and mutual learning** with German, Austrian and Swiss schools, and is active in Erasmus+ projects providing trainings to schools across the EU.[111] The ZFP also takes part in the "European Solidarity Corps" support programme, which enables it to offer learning, professional, and personal improvement opportunities to young people from other European countries.

(Potential) impact

The various special and mainstream school mergers promoted by the ZFP are at different stages of developing into fully integrated campuses, but the most advanced of the ZFP's experiments is the **first case in Belgium of a fully integrated school**. Four more campuses are soon expected to reach the same level as the "spearhead" one, building capacity for mainstream schools to fully include students with disabilities.

According to the ZFP's director, the centre's integration model is informed by the principle of "maximum

integration possible and minimum level of separation needed." This might seem to sacrifice inclusion in favour of pragmatism, but in practice, as the figures about separate classrooms indicate, the goal of full inclusion is **consistently pursued**, and in line with the level of inclusion achieved in more radical practices.

The yearly requirements contractually placed on mainstream schools are **monitored yearly**. The number of students with disabilities in inclusive education is also monitored and has been steadily increasing since the ZFP's creation. In particular, the Community registered a **near-total decline** in the number of students with **learning** and **mild disabilities** in special schools, as they are now successfully included in mainstream ones. The ZFP is, however, also registering an increase in pupils exhibiting socio-emotional behavioural problems.

Opportunities for scalability or replication

Stakeholders describe the ZFP's approach as "pragmatic", noting the importance of **guaranteeing continuity of employment** for special schools' staff. The ZFP's approach also makes it a model for countries where political will and mainstream schools' readiness to transition to inclusive education is **still forming**.

For its model of "maximum integration possible and minimum level of separation needed" to be replicated, however, it is important that **practices' owners are committed to inclusion**, even if gradual. Otherwise, these principles may be abused to maintain unacceptable levels of segregation.

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[111] See for example the "Inclusive education and STEAM: expanding learning opportunities" project, involving visits to the ZFP from the staff of the Martynas Mažvydas pro-gymnasium (a type of elementary and lower secondary school) from Kaunas, Lithuania. Pauliukienė, J. 2022. Integracija ir įtraukusis ugdymas vokiškai kalbančioje Belgijos bendruomenėje. *Švietimo naujenos*, 11 Nov 2022. Available: https://www.svietimonaujienos.lt/integracija-ir-itraukusis-ugdymas-vokiskai-kalbancioje-belgijos-bendruomeneje/

Administrative autonomy, like the one the ZFP enjoys, is also advisable, as it allows practices to act as ground breakers even in socio-political contexts reluctant to introduce inclusive education. It is also worth noting that even if the ZFP operates in a very small community, its model is being used as an inspiration in the far larger French Community, indicating that it **can be useful for larger institutional settings**, too.

The ReBUZ model in Bremen: Diverse, multidisciplinary, flexible support for inclusive education

Country: Germany,

Free Hanseatic City of Bremen

Scale: Regional

Knowledge transfer: Intermediated

Type: Practice

Platform

Year implemented: Late 2000s

At a glance:

Bremen introduced Regional Advice and Support Centres (ReBUZ) to promote inclusive education in a fragmented, federalised national context that is still struggling to accept it.

ReBUZ are knowledge centres and service providers helping schools address problems in transition to inclusive education, as well as issues occurring in schools in general; they cooperate with schools' internal centres dedicated to inclusive education.

ReBUZ work both operationally, checking school's preparedness to ensure inclusive education, and on a case-by-case level, addressing critical situations through class interventions.

Through the reform centred on ReBUZ, Bremen has become a national leader in inclusive education, and one of few German states on pair with Europe's best practices.

Background

Germany's inclusive education statistics, at least in terms of number of students in inclusive education (if not in terms of educational achievements, put the country at a disadvantage compared to its Southern and Northern European counterparts; additionally,

Germany does not have guaranteed full access to secondary and tertiary inclusive education, professional training of inclusive education teachers, and participatory involvement of stakeholders in decisions related to inclusive education.[112]

However, Germany's education system is organised on a *state*, rather than federal, level: thus, within a generally negative picture, it is possible to find localised good practices that go against the national trend. The model of inclusive education of the **Free Hanseatic City of Bremen** (henceforth, Bremen) is one of them. At the end of the 2000s, Bremen's authorities proceeded with an educational reform that led to the **progressive closure of almost all of the city-state's special schools**, especially those catering to students with learning disabilities and psycho-social disabilities, their replacement with knowledge and service centres for inclusive education, and the transfer of students with disabilities to mainstream schools. To date, only four, highly specialised schools are still operating, though one of them (catering to students with significant psycho-social and behavioural disabilities) is scheduled for closure.[113]

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[112] EASPD. 2020. *Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries.* Available: https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/projekte/fzib/FZIB_Pdfs/EASPD_Barometer_report_2020_FINAL.pdf; EASPD. 2011. *EASPD-Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries.* Available: https://includ-ed.eu/sites/default/files/good-pratice/files/dissemination-paper-english-web_0.pdf.

[113] The three schools expected to continue operations each focus on three separate groups: blind students; deaf students; students with "psycho-motoric impairments" (a category that includes severe intellectual disabilities).

Approach

As a replacement for the specialised educational institutions, Bremen's authorities initially created special classes within mainstream schools, with roughly a 3/1 ratio of students without disabilities and students with disabilities, one support teacher per class, and varying numbers of personal assistants per class. **Support teachers and personal assistants were, initially, mainly former special schools' staff**. Every school also has to appoint a dedicated headmaster, accountable to the Bremen Education Ministry, responsible for managing the support staff, and for running an in-school Supportive Education Centre (*Zentrum für unterstützende Pädagogik*, or **ZuP**). ZuPs are tasked with **developing special programmes and curricula for inclusive education**, organizing internal support systems, and trainings of teachers on latest developments on inclusive education. In the future, schools will also have to introduce **Individualised Plans**, similar to those already in use in other EU countries.[114]

In the initial phases of transition, however, authorities realised that mainstream schools faced issues, as special education teachers who moved into mainstream education were not involved in class planning, and limited effort was put in creating stable relationships between pupils with and without disabilities. This showed that schools required a **counselling system** to give mainstream schools professional help to tackle challenging situations; help former special education teachers deal with much larger classes; address the issues of students with learning disabilities; and ensure the continuation of professional standards as former special education teachers started to retire.

To address these issues, authorities established what would later become the cornerstone of the "Bremen model" of inclusive education: four **Regional Advice and Support Centres** (*Regionale Beratungs- und Unterstützungszentren*, or **ReBUZ**), one for each of the sectors of the city-state (Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern). These are knowledge centres and service providers, assisting schools, pupils and parents in ensuring access to inclusive education, and ensuring, though monitoring of schools' activities, that schools and their pedagogical methods are attuned to the needs of students with SEN.

Schools of all levels and types across Bremen are expected, in case of problems, to reach out to ReBUZ, which are tasked with providing **holistic, interdisciplinary advice and help**: ReBUZ experts are trained to consider in an interconnected way not only the child's medical impairments and disabilities, but also the risk of depression, social and emotional problems, degree and risk of social marginalisation, and risk of school dropout. This allows to overcome previous habits to treat children with disabilities based on a single diagnosis of disability. ReBUZ' support services, on the other hand, involve teams of psychologists, special education teachers, social workers, and regular teachers who completed special education trainings to become counsellors, bringing together diverse professionals to better understand the complexity of needs,[115] and working on the basis of the systemic counselling method used in systemic therapy.[116] ReBUZ do not conduct systemic therapy per se, but use its attitude and methods in counselling: although the line is sometimes blurred, ReBUZ' systemic counselling is generally shorter and less deep than therapy.

Accessibility and inclusivity is an important aspect of ReBUZ' activities: counsel from ReBUZ can be requested by teachers, but also by parents, social workers working in schools, or by pupils themselves, which make the ReBUZ desk help more directly accessible to persons with disabilities than some other inclusive education systems based on knowledge-sharing centres.

Interventions begin when a stakeholder contacts the ReBUZ, either in person or via help desk: ReBUZ employees gather the initial information from the contact person(s) and discuss it during weekly planning

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[114] See case studies from Italy in this report for an example.

[115] ReBUZ also employ two sociologists to ensure a more systemic observation and insight.

[116] Systemic therapy is an approach that focuses not just on individuals' emotions and feelings, but on their interaction within a broader groups (from families, to classrooms, and workplaces), in contexts in which the ability to successfully function within a group is a necessary precondition for individual wellbeing and success. Walters, S., BACP 2023. *What is systemic therapy?* Available: https://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/types-of-therapy/systemic-therapy/

meetings to decide how to proceed: depending on the type of problem described, **specialised staff is assigned to each case**. ReBUZ' mandate primarily pertains to the solution of **challenging situations** that undermine the regular functioning of the class as a whole: accordingly, they most often support children with psycho-social or behavioural disabilities struggling to function in class or behaving aggressively; children failing to reach learning milestones; victims of bullying; children at risk of school dropout or having depressive behaviours; as well as pupils who have Reactive Attachment Disorder.[117]

ReBUZ experts' interventions are flexible in nature. Their work usually starts with classroom interventions, whereby experts observe class activities, determine the severity of the issue, and decide how many resources to allocate to address a specific situation. There is no limit to the amount of time that can be dedicated to each student: ReBUZ experts enjoy full flexibility in this area. The initial assessment is followed by talks with teachers, parents, and the pupil(s) themselves, after which ReBUZ experts decide if they should offer pedagogical counselling to the teachers, psychological therapy for the student, or methodological advice to the school as a whole. Interventions therefore range from individual to systemic; the strength of ReBUZ' interventions lie in the fact that experts benefit from knowledge developed and shared by a centralised institution, and are able to redistribute this knowledge across the territory.

Sometimes the support of ReBUZ experts is not sufficient to address the **needs of children with significant mental disorders or severe behavioural problems**. In such cases, **mobile teams of specialists**, organised by Bremen's last-remaining special school for children with severe psycho-social and behavioural disabilities,[118] intervene as observers in classes, generally in collaboration with ReBUZ specialists. Some students with severe behavioural issues and challenging family situations, and/or adolescents at severe risk of school dropout, may also be sent to **"respite groups"**, small classes run directly by ReBUZ but followed by mainstream schools' teachers, for periods of a few months (and in rarer cases, for up to one or two grades).

A key area of ReBUZ work is **dissemination of knowledge** between former special education teachers, support teachers, and mainstream education teachers:

ReBUZ ensures this by running a **repository of best practices encountered during class interventions** by ReBUZ staffers, who log into their reports any example of effective educational and pedagogical practices in addressing the needs of students with disabilities. ReBUZ experts can thus replicate the model and lessons learnt, and act as multipliers across different schools. Best practices are only identified in (and disseminated to) schools where ReBUZ staffers happen to intervene, but as Bremen moves towards the closure of the last special school for children with severe psycho-social and behavioural disabilities, ReBUZ that will assist pupils in the transition to mainstream schools are also **preparing to collect knowledge and expertise from this special school** to disseminate it more systematically among ReBUZ expert and, in turn, mainstream schools.

Challenges & limitations

One interviewed stakeholder anonymously reported that the idea to move children into mainstream education may have originated in part from public authorities' desire to save money running inclusive classes instead of more expensive special schools. However, the excessive focus on cost-saving led to an **initial underfunding** of inclusive education (including ReBUZ). This compelled authorities to adjust funding early into the reform, but even to this day, demand sometimes outstrips available funding, leaving ReBUZ with a **lower number of special education teachers than needed**.

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[117] Reactive Attachment Disorder is a condition often encountered among children with a background of abuse, complex trauma, of neglect, who as a result struggle to forge normal and meaningful relations with their caretakers and develop difficulties in regulating emotions. See Cleveland Clinic 2022. *Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)*. Available: https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17904-reactive-attachment-disorder

[118] This school is also scheduled to close at the end of the 2023-2024 school year. Pupils will move to ReBUZ groups across their respective regions. The details of this transition are being worked out at the time of writing (Fall 2023), but in principle, each ReBUZ should receive around four groups of pupils from the former school to educate directly.

This is compounded by a general issue of **under-funding of education**, and parallel **growth in needs following the COVID-19 pandemic**, which has caused an increase in behavioural issues among children and young people, and significantly extended psychotherapy services' waiting lists. While in no way unique to Bremen (or Germany), these issues are seen by some stakeholders as especially serious in the city-state.

Success factors

ReBUZ experts are **not bound by strict budgetary requirements** to account for every hour spent in an intervention: they enjoy considerable freedom in deciding the scale and duration of interventions. Moreover, their targets of intervention are **not strictly limited to medically diagnosed disabilities**: ReBUZ can intervene also to support any students with behavioural and psycho-social issues who struggle to function in a class setting.

For children with disabilities, a diagnostic process exists, but for several types of disabilities this is directly handled by the schools and the ReBUZ on the basis of needs. Education institutions thus do not depend on medical authorities to decide to allocate help. Children with **social-emotional problems or learning difficulties** receive resources such as special educational support based on a recognition of status whereby schools are responsible for determining the existence of a learning disability, whereas the ReBUZ determines if there are special educational needs and a socio-emotional development delay.

(Potential) impact

Around **99.2%** of students are now in inclusive education across the territory, making Bremen a leader in Germany, on pair with some of the more successful models Europe-wide. Since the creation of ReBUZ, **more students, especially adolescents with learning disabilities**, previously flagged as "in need of special education," were able to finish school.

Thanks to the territorial nature of ReBUZ' work, students with disabilities can **attend their local schools**, avoiding long bus trips to the few special schools. Furthermore, ReBUZ' flexible, systemic therapy-based class interventions, not restricted to children with a formal diagnosis, also helps with the **inclusion of other children at risk of social marginalization**, such as those with a migrant background or students who developed emotional and interpersonal issues due to severe neglect.

Impact is systematically monitored: Bremen's Education Ministry runs regular studies and audits, which result in recommendations and reports, though one interviewed stakeholder notes that additional reports would be welcome, in particular to understand how many students need more tailored programmes.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

ReBUZ are **a valuable model of a territorial, multidisciplinary, diverse, and flexible practice**, which shows that it is possible to set up inclusive education services even in the absence of nation-wide political will. Bremen's model also provides an example of how the responsibility for promoting inclusive education can be **effectively shared** between schools (each of which is expected to run a ZuP) and authorities with a broader scope (such as ReBUZ).

Some of the lessons learnt from the ReBUZ experience indicate that **coordination between territorial services and higher education** is crucial to ensure successful inclusive education: a major early setback in ReBUZ' work came when the local university shut down its highly advanced courses on special education, in the assumption that mainstream teachers would simply learn to address the needs of pupils with disabilities on the job, and that there would be limited demand for special education training. This mistake was corrected by introducing *inclusive* pedagogy courses at local universities, instead, but it still resulted in a significant **loss in knowledge transmission**. Educational systems that seek to set up territorial services such as ReBUZ should make sure that an **integrated strategy** to ensure **training of support and mainstream teachers from BA level is in place**. This requires that authorities set up an effective organisational cooperation with (and adequate funding mechanisms for) local universities.

Playing with the system to advance inclusive education at Hoeksche Waard's *Samenwerkingsverband* (Partnership), the Netherlands

Country:
The Netherlands

Scale:
Regional

Type:
Practice

Year implemented:
Since 2021

Knowledge transfer:
Intermediated

At a glance:

The Dutch education system is one of the most segregated in Europe. Schools themselves, school boards, and local authorities called Samenwerkingsverband (SWV) are expected to devise solutions to promote inclusive education. The central government directs this process via national policy and adaptation of legislation.

The SWV in the Hoeksche Waard municipality organises advocacy and capacity building activities to mainstream inclusive education and practically assist schools in pursuing it.

The SWV facilitates interventions from qualified and vetted disability specialists and experts in inclusive education, including from special schools, who intervene to help mainstream schools using a participatory approach to advise teachers.

Interventions are found to be successful in 80% of the cases, and according to several metrics, the SWV's rate of referral of students to special education is considerably lower than in the rest of the country.

Background

Experts note major problems with inclusive education in the Netherlands: The country has **one of the most segregated education systems in Europe**,[119] leaving increasing numbers of children with disabilities **relegated at home** due to the impossibility to find a place in education; despite the ratification of the UN CRPD in 2016 and growing willingness among some schools to accept students with disabilities, major issues persist due to **lack of extra funding**; lack of a **clear strategy and timeline** to pursue

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[119]   The Dutch system is organised around four "clusters" of type of disability, and inclusion levels vary greatly by cluster. Only two clusters, Cluster 1 (visually impaired and blind children) and Cluster 2 (children with a hearing impairment or deaf), have reached inclusion levels in line with other EU countries (around 80% and around 50%, respectively). The other two clusters are Cluster 3 (children with a physic impairment and/or intellectual disability and/or long time illness) and Cluster 4 (children with severe behaviour problems and/or mental disorders). Schools in the clusters operate smaller classes with specialised support. There is also a further type of special education, called "special *primary* education," which is not specialised by type of disability and tends to mainly assist students with mild behavioural issues or learning disabilities. Classes in this latter type of schools are generally larger than the specialised classes in the four clusters, though still smaller than those in general education.

inclusive education (beyond generic commitments to achieve inclusive education by 2035); and **insufficient adaptation of national legislation**.[120]

Interviewed experts note that the Dutch education system's key principle of school autonomy **removes incentives** for mainstream schools to accept students with disabilities: schools are nominally required to accept them, but are granted ample room to make a case that they are not in a condition to do so, while parents often find it prohibitively expensive and too time-consuming to sue them over the decision.

Problems also stem from existing legal provisions that stipulate that **mainstream and special schools cannot share the same building** as a unified entity,[121] and that **special schools that convert to mainstream schools lose funding** for care for students with disabilities, which reduces the incentive for them to de-segregate. Some **pilot projects** of cooperation between special and mainstream schools exist,[122] but they remain few and far between.

The responsibility to make the decision to start promoting inclusive education is delegated to **sub-regional school administrations** overseeing special and mainstream schools called *Samenwerkingsverband* ("partnerships;" henceforth: **SWV**), of which all schools are mandated to be part of. It is up to the directors of SWVs to devise incentives for schools to embrace inclusive education, and it is thus among individual SWVs that good practices can be found. School boards that make up the SWV can make agreements on their joint policy to become more inclusive, although this is not yet mandated and there is **vast diversity in commitment** among the different SWVs.

Approach

One of the SWVs that consistently pursues inclusive education is the **Hoeksche Waard SWV** (Henceforth: the SWV). It unites the 35 mainstream schools and three special schools at primary level, with around 6,000 students overall, of Hoeksche Waard, a rural municipality[123] of approximately 87,000 inhabitants in South Holland.

Driven by a sceptical view of the government's inclusive education plans, which she sees as indecisive, the SWV's direction (in charge since 2021) initiated a

programme across the municipality to ensure that all children with disabilities in the SWV's area receive education **close to their own neighbourhoods, and in mainstream schools**, treating special education as a **residual, rather than default option**. The policy is scheduled to be revised and adjusted every four years.

The SWV's action is two-pronged, consisting of:

- **Advocacy activities** to overcome hostile attitudes to inclusive education and disability;
- **Capacity building activities** to bolster mainstream schools' ability to provide inclusive education.

Advocacy activities seek to tackle **systemic issues of negative perception of disability and inclusive education**. Academic literature has long noted significant reluctance among Dutch teachers to accept responsibility for students with SEN in mainstream education.[124] This is corroborated by observations of the SWV's director, who notes a strong tendency among some of the teachers to **draw clear lines of separation** between "mainstream" and "special education" professionals, and often harbour **preconceived assumptions** about children with disabilities that have a major impact on their approach to students.

[120] Defence For Children International 2023. *DCI-Netherlands*. Available: https://defenceforchildren.org/the-importance-of-inclusive-education-in-the-netherlands/; integrated with stakeholders interviews. One interviewed national expert estimates the number of children left out of education to be as high as 20 000.

[121] Schools can operate in the same building but have to remain administratively separate; if they share facilities, they need to remain administratively separate entities.

[122] Around thirty schools were exempted from the above-mentioned provisions, allowing them to share facilities and budgets for 5-6 years, after which special schools can opt to become mainstream ones without losing funding.

[123] Despite their name, Dutch "municipalities" (*gemeenten*) are far larger than corresponding institutions in other Western European countries, as they have an average of 52,000 inhabitants, as opposed to 7,500 in German *Gemeinden* or Italian *comuni,* 6.000 in Spanish *municipios,* or 1,950 in French *communes.*

[124] Pijl, S. J. 2010. "Preparing teachers for inclusive education: some reflections from the Netherlands." *Journal of Research in Special Education Needs* 10:1, pp. 197-201.

To address these issues, the SWV organises meetings to **discuss and develop plans to implement inclusive education** with the responsible school staff: school directors, and a dedicated staffer tasked with coordinating the additional support for SEN children and with advising teachers in cases where inclusive education is difficult. The school director and the coordinating staffer in turn encourage and stimulate the work of the rest of staff.

The SWV's director also advocates directly among teachers to overcome the idea of a separation between "mainstream" and "special" education, and to establish the notion that all teachers should be ready and willing to work with children with SEN. The SWV also works with headmasters to encourage them to become ambassadors for inclusive education in their school, for example by organising **motivational conferences.**

Capacity building activities aim to boost **mainstream schools' ability to provide inclusive education**, in coordination with local special schools. The first stage is "internal coaching", a three-months intervention conducted by school coaches (professionals with advanced pedagogical training) to assist teachers experiencing challenges in their classroom when teaching students with SEN/disabilities. School coaches, however, are not specialised in disability, which is why internal interventions generally develop into **external experts' interventions**, the backbone of the SWV's action. Schools can also decide to move proactively to external experts' interventions right away when they expect issues to emerge in a class.

External experts' interventions, facilitated by the SWV, run for periods of at least three months. Teams (of varying size) of disability specialists, including from **special education institutions, vetted by the SWV**, step in to either **advise schools** on how to prevent issues when addressing the needs of students with SEN/disabilities, or **intervene in critical situations.** The experts must have an MA in psychology or remedial education, unless they are special education teachers, in which case practical experience is an equivalent qualification.

The experts are trained in a unique approach, *Consultatieve Leerling Begeleiding* **("Consultative Student Guidance"**; henceforth, CLB). In CLB interventions, a facilitator (the expert) assists a teacher struggling with students by analysing the teaching-learning situation, as experienced by the teacher as a problem, determining together with the teacher what they seek to achieve with each student, what is not working in addressing the student's needs, what the teacher is worried about, and searching for solutions together with the teacher in a **horizontal, participatory manner that rejects the older diagnostic/therapeutic approach** ("I [the expert] know what is good for you and/or what is wrong with the student").[125]

Using CLB and their specialised knowledge in various areas of disability, behavioural issues and other areas of criticality, experts help schools understand the needs of children with disabilities. Once **individual needs** are identified, experts assist teachers in **adjusting teaching practices and methods accordingly**. Expert interventions seek to:

- Change teachers' teaching repertoire, for example, instructing teachers to use specific "tricks" and practical skills in **helping children with ADHD or other concentration issues**;
- Adapt pedagogical and didactic methods, for example, training teachers to adjust their **way of providing instructions** to the specific needs of children with learning disabilities;
- Train teachers on how to **de-escalate emotionally complex situations** when assisting pupils with severe behavioural issues;
- **Change teachers' attitudes** about children with disabilities to adjust teacher-pupil relationships by avoiding negative stereotypes.

Schools reach out to external experts themselves, using **extra funding allocated by the SWV**: each school is granted a **yearly funding of EUR 400 multiplied by the number of pupils** (with or without disabilities) by the SWV to use for additional educational needs, broadly defined to include extra teachers, inclusive education support, and the like. Funding is calculated based on the number of pupils but **is not tied to individual children**: a school can thus spend as much as needed on interventions

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[125] Noordelijk Onderwijsgilde 2022. *Interview with Dr. Wim Meijer.* Available: https://issuu.com/noordelijk-onderwijsgilde/docs/noordelijk_onderwijsgilde_magazine_2021-2022/s/11817956

involving a specific child or children. Thanks to the SWV's parallel advocacy activities, schools are positively encouraged to invest the additional funding for inclusive education, while still preserving their freedom of choice. As a result of this, schools are growing more accustomed to reach for expert help proactively in potentially problematic classes.

Success factors

A key success factor of Hoeksche Waard SWV's work is the balance between **freedom and discretion** on the one hand, and **accountability and oversight** on the other. Funding in the SWV goes directly to schools, but the SWV also holds regular meetings with experts and school directors to review, in a participatory way, the way funds were used in interventions, and how the intervention unfolded.

In a context in which schools appreciate freedom and independence, another success factor is the way the SWV's **advocacy and capacity building activities dovetail**: The combination of both effectively promotes the development of inclusive education as a **free choice for schools**, which retain autonomy and flexibility in deciding when and how to involve external experts.

The use of the CLB ensures a **participatory intervention** where teachers co-own the results of interventions and expert advice received; CLB is also heavily centred on **students' needs and capacities**, rather than on medical diagnoses of disability.

Challenges & limitations

Overall funding is centrally allocated by SWV depending on their size; at the time of writing, the amount of funding is seen as sufficient, but **future central government policies may threaten this**.[126]

Despite being recognised as a potentially highly valuable solution in inclusive education, **co-teaching is difficult in the current circumstances**, due to a structural issue of teachers' shortage in the Netherlands.

The highly de-centralised Dutch system, with significant freedom and limited national level policy guidance,

allows stakeholders to experiment freely, but ultimately, makes the advancement of inclusive education **dependent on individual motivation and ingenuity**, making good practices inherently fragile.

(Potential) impact

The SWV collects data on expert interventions' effectiveness through de-briefs with experts and schools' headmasters. **Experts rate interventions as effective around 80% of the times**; if an intervention is unsuccessful, the SWV steps in to decide what else can be done to avoid placement in special education.

By some metrics, the SWV has **far fewer referrals to special education than the national average**, and several schools within the municipality are praised by the SWV for having reached impressive results in inclusive education. Specifically, the rate of primary school students in special education in the four clusters[127] across the territory of the SWV is 0.93%, against a national average of 1.91%.

However, the SWV director notes that more precise data is still needed, which is why the SWV is currently working alongside the school boards to develop a **system of standardised metrics** to better understand the effectiveness of interventions. These metrics will also become part of school boards' standard tools when auditing schools.

Opportunities for scalability & replication

A model such as that of the SWV's interventions is highly suitable for replications in contexts in which there exists sufficient **autonomy** for schools and their overseeing authorities to decide how to allocate funding, coupled with a certain degree of openness to implement inclusive education policies; whenever the

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[126] In particular, the government is considering introducing a system whereby funding for an SWV in a given fiscal year is reduced if it did not spend all the funds allocated in the previous one.

[127] See first footnote in this case study for an overview of the "clusters" and the non-cluster special education system.

latter is absent, a solid **advocacy strategy** is needed to make schools open to the idea.

The SWV's model also requires the **presence of local experts**, which makes it very useful for educational systems that still have large number of special schools where knowledge and expertise are concentrated.

The model **may also be adapted to contexts with more centralised policies and control**, where schools may already have strong obligations to deliver inclusive education, but insufficient means to do so, as a way to give all schools across a territory equal access to **similarly qualified, vetted expert advice**.

Section 2.
Success factors and challenges

This section details the key success factors and challenges registered across the investigated practices. The table below provides a visual summary thereof: the first column indicates the key areas that determine success or create obstacles for inclusive education; the second column lists success factors in each area, while the third details existing challenges. The fourth column lists the investigated policies and practices that embody the success factors and are effectively addressing (or are designed to address) the challenges, and therefore constitute inspiring models.

Table 2. *Summary of key success factors and challenges across case studies*

Area	Success factors	Challenges	Relevant policies and practices
Legislation & strategic policy	••• Clear legal requirement for mainstream schools to accept students with disabilities. ••• Clear goals and time-defined milestones to phase-out segregated provision. ••• Right for schools to use flexible, adaptable curricula and modify assessments.	••• Legislation supporting a dual education system by granting freedom for mainstream schools to refuse children with SEN/disabilities. ••• No time-defined plans or monitoring to transition from segregated provision. ••• Rigid academic curricula and assessments.	••• Legal obligations towards inclusion in Portugal and Italy. ••• Finland's flexible national curriculum.
Governance	••• Granting relative financial and organisational autonomy for education providers. ••• Guidance from national and local levels for schools on organising support. ••• Multidisciplinary approach: defining organisational structures, including roles, processes, and monitoring mechanisms at school and local levels. ••• Dedicating time for education and support staff to meet and learn from each other. ••• Including learners and their families in decision-making (at individual, local and national levels).	••• Compartmentalised approach: lack of dialogue-driven culture between professionals. ••• Lack of guidance on how support should be organised, leading to inefficiencies. ••• Support allocation, type and duration legally tied to diagnosis. ••• Necessity to function with limited staff in some localities. ••• Inadequate allocation of time and human resources by school and local administrators.	••• Finland's pupil welfare teams or Portugal's multidisciplinary teams). ••• Coordinating roles of the ZFP and Territorial Poles in the German and French communities in Belgium and SWV in the Netherlands. ••• Special schools forming mobile teams in Lithuania and Slovenia. ••• Inclusion Ambassadors project to voice the opinions of young persons with additional learning needs in Scotland.

Area	Success factors	Challenges	Relevant policies and practices
Funding	••• Awareness that inclusive education requires constant, growing funding. ••• Funding based on lump-sum principle. ••• Advocacy for schools and local communities to dedicate non-earmarked funds to inclusive education.	••• Austerity policies. ••• Funding for additional learning support tied to individual children with recognition of SEN/disabilities.	••• Lump-sum funding models in Portugal and Finland. ••• Dedicating non-earmarked funding towards inclusion in the Netherlands.
Attitudes towards inclusive education	••• Mainstreamed understanding among staff, parents, and local authorities that inclusive education benefits all students. ••• Embracing the diversity of learners in school communities. ••• Educators' openness towards collaboration in the classroom.	••• Lack of readiness for change, prejudices held in school communities. ••• Too much focus on academic achievement in the education system. ••• Education of students with SEN/disabilities seen as "a task for support teachers".	••• Finnish whole-school behaviour support model *ProKoulu*. ••• IC Sovere school celebrating difference and addressing unique learning needs. ••• Seeing other marginalised groups as potential beneficiaries in Bremen and Belgium. ••• Battling negative stereotypes in the Netherlands.
Pedagogical models and school staff's training	••• Support centred on adapting the learning environment and other aspects of school life to learners' individual needs. ••• Multi-tiered support models, with strong focus on universal approaches. ••• Professionals and support staff assisting not only students but teachers. ••• Availability of easily applicable methodological resources. ••• Practice-oriented, tailored trainings and active learning. ••• Trainings aimed at teams of support organisers.	••• Specialist staff transferring medical model-informed practices to mainstream schools. ••• Preference for targeted deficiency-based interventions. ••• Inadequate in-service training for education staff and support organisers. ••• University training for teachers lacks orientation towards inclusive education principles.	••• Perceiving schools as clients in the Irish In-School Therapy Support model. ••• Introducing multi-tiered support models in Finland and Ireland. ••• School staff and parents' active learning and networking in Lithuania, Serbia and Italy. ••• Post-graduate courses for support teachers in Italy balancing detail and accessibility. ••• Scotland's practical methodological resources CIRCLE.

Source: developed by the authors

Chapter 1.
Key success factors for the transfer of knowledge

Based on observations collected across the case studies, the transfer of knowledge to support the transition from special education to inclusive education appears to rely on multiple success factors. This chapter provides a list of aspects that make the transfer of knowledge – and the overall transition towards inclusion – smoother.

Legislation and strategic policy

Clear legal requirement for mainstream schools to accept students with disabilities. The transition towards inclusion becomes faster when there is a commitment to ensure all children have the right to inclusive education close to their homes. When this goal is elaborated in detail in legislation, obligations and accountability become explicit, and schools and local authorities cannot refuse to educate and provide support to a particular child on the basis of disability. Such obligations are foreseen in, for example, Portugal and Italy, and is in the process of being applied in Lithuanian legislation as of the time of writing this report in the second half of 2023.

Clear goals and time-defined milestones to phase-out segregated provision. The transfer of knowledge and resources towards inclusive education can be accelerated with time-framed national strategies to close down any existing large institutions caring for children with disabilities and transfer resources to mainstream education and inclusive community-based services. Such a step was taken in Portugal, where the majority of special schools were closed down in a few-year period. In Serbia, for example, the government is implementing a study on the potential future role of its special schools.

Right for schools to use flexible, adaptable curricula. Teachers' ability to modify the curriculum and assessment in accordance with individual needs facilitates the education of children with SEN/disabilities together with 'typical' learners. This can allow to avoid transferring students to an alternative special education curriculum and, in many cases, segregated provision. In Finland, the national curriculum serves as a guiding framework for teachers, retaining a lot of room for modification and innovation. An increasing number of schools in Europe are introducing individual education plans (IEPs) as a standard practice (e.g., Italy, Portugal, German-speaking Community of Belgium).

Governance

Granting relative financial and organisational autonomy for education providers. Finland's experience shows that when schools can organise support themselves, they may become more effective, flexible, and willing to experiment with new methods (e.g., co-teaching, flexible grouping), instead of tying the specialists' time to students based on their diagnosis. One of the successes of Belgium's German-speaking Community is the vast autonomy of the Centre for Special Education, which adopts customised and needs-based solutions and interventions in mainstream schools, such as adjusting teaching programmes or merging special education and mainstream classes. On the other hand, in cases when school or local education authorities are not motivated, such freedom can stifle inclusion efforts.

Guidance from national and local levels for schools on organising support. Education providers may benefit from guidance on how to fulfil their duties towards inclusion. While the autonomy of education providers is important, some of them may need external guidance (from the national and/or local education authorities or knowledge centres) on how to plan support provision. Assigning coordinating bodies (see cases of Bremen and Belgium's French and German-speaking Communities) or local coaches (see cases of *ProKoulu* in Finland and CIRCLE in Scotland) can lead to smoother school transformations.

Multidisciplinary approach: defining organisational structures, including roles, processes, and monitoring mechanisms at school and local levels. Defining modes of collaboration (vertically, horizontally, and cross-professionally) is an important step.[128] Establishing multidisciplinary teams of mainstream teachers and support staff, such as special education teachers, medical and health specialists (either in-house or external) is important to determine how to address individual cases, coordinate interventions and allocate resources (see, for example, Finland's pupil welfare teams or Portugal's multidisciplinary teams). The coordinating roles of the ZFP in Belgium (German-speaking Community) and Territorial Poles in the French Community in Belgium also provide positive examples.

Dedicating time for education and support staff to meet and learn from each other. Schools that are successful in supporting their pupils' learning and care ensure that professional collaboration and consultation are systematically implemented and does not only happen 'on paper'. For that to happen, school and local administrators should allocate time and space for professionals to meet during their working hours (see Finland's example).

Including learners and their families in decision-making (at individual, local and national levels). Although their systematic and active representation is not yet commonplace, positive steps were already taken by the Scottish Government, which funds the nation-wide Inclusion Ambassadors project to voice the opinions of young persons with additional learning needs. In Portugal, parents/caregivers can co-design their children's school pathways by participating in multidisciplinary teams that decide on support provision. Such practices can lead to better-informed, more effective, and transparent interventions.

Funding

Awareness that inclusive education requires constant, growing funding. Appropriate support from public authorities is needed to give operational sustainability to inclusive practices, maintain sufficient levels of support for students, and ensure decent wages and working conditions for practitioners. While most European education systems tend to operate under

scarce financial conditions, this can be improved by well-functioning relationships between education providers and local authorities (e.g., some Lithuanian municipalities fund various capacity-building activities for schools, as well as hire additional therapists and psychologists who visit them).

Funding based on lump-sum principle. Stakeholders report that funding models where the budget for support is dedicated based on certain characteristics such as school size help direct support staff where it is most needed. International actors also advocate for a shift from labelling-based funding to funding based on stakeholder needs (which may involve not only direct interventions to students, but also capacity-building activities, universal measures, administrative support, etc.).[129] Portugal has recently adapted a lump-sum funding model for schools, which allows education providers to allocate learning/healthcare support to students faster, since there is no longer a need to wait for a diagnosis. In Finland, funding for municipalities depends on the overall number of compulsory-school-age residents in that municipality; however, the national government can allocate additional funding if there are students in extended compulsory education (students with especially high levels of needs). Such formulas remove fiscal incentives for municipalities and schools to refer children to special education to trigger access to funding and allow more manoeuvre in applying innovative pedagogical approaches.

Advocacy for schools and local communities to dedicate non-earmarked funds to inclusive education. In the Netherlands, each school is granted a yearly non-earmarked funding of EUR 400 multiplied by the total number of pupil. In the area of Hoeksche Waard, the local authority continuously encourages its schools to invest this lump-sum funding towards greater additional learning support.

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[128] This is also empasised in European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. 2022. *Changing Role of Specialist Provision in Supporting Inclusive Education: Final Synthesis Report* (A. Kefallinou, M. Kyriazopoulou, S. Ebersold, P. Skoglund, E. Rebollo Píriz and M. Lučić Wichmann, eds.). Odense, Denmark. Available: https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/CROSP_Final_Synthesis_Report.pdf

[129] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. 2022.

Attitudes towards inclusive education

Mainstreamed understanding among staff, parents, and local authorities that inclusive education benefits all students. A common concern among education providers and parents is that inclusive education will increase the already high workloads of teachers and disrupt classwork. However, some of the investigated practices demonstrate that inclusive approaches can, in fact, lower the amount of time spent on dealing with behavioural issues of students, with or without SEN/disabilities, as well as improve the overall school climate (see In-School Therapy Support model in Ireland, or the behavioural support model *ProKoulu* in Finland). Education providers are shifting away from seeing inclusivity as only related to SEN/disabilities, but rather perceive all students as potential beneficiaries of inclusive education, e.g., students at risk of social marginalisation, interrupted learners, students with migration background and different language capacities, etc. (see ReBUZ centres in Bremen, Germany and the ZFP in the German-speaking Community in Belgium). Moreover, activities involving students with and without disabilities build empathy and shared responsibility towards each other (see IC Sovere school in Italy, where students are encouraged to assist and support their classmates with disabilities, while students with disabilities are invited to educate their peers on their needs and lived experiences). Communicating about this potential can increase motivation towards inclusion in school communities.

Embracing the diversity of learners in school communities. Schools that succeed at inclusion tend to follow a mindset that success looks different for everybody. They value and celebrate the achievements of children who have learning barriers, moving beyond exam results and academic achievement (see more on the "Success looks different" awards, organised by the Inclusion Ambassadors in Scotland, as well as IC Sovere's practice of addressing unique learning needs).

Educators' openness towards collaboration in the classroom. This includes teachers' willingness to have another adult present in the classroom and not seeing them as 'auditors' but rather as partners. In Finland, classroom teachers are expected to have good teamwork and leadership skills.

Pedagogical models and training of support organisers

Support centred on adapting the learning environment and other aspects of school life to learners' individual needs. Inclusive education rests on pedagogical models that emphasise the individual talents and strengths of the student, rather than one's deficiencies. The Irish In-School Therapy Support model demonstrates how occupational therapists and speech and language therapists can advise teachers on how to dynamically and effectively apply interventions dedicated to the whole class or the school environment, without excluding children with SEN.

Multi-tiered support models, with strong focus on universal approaches. At least several investigated countries have adapted pyramid-like three-tiered frameworks of support, consisting of universal, targeted, and intensive/special support levels (see, for example, Finland's or Ireland's three-tiered models). Education authorities encourage teachers to try out universal approaches and, only if they do not bring expected results, move to higher levels of support. *ProKoulu,* the Finnish whole-school behaviour support model, is a good example of prioritising measures aimed at all students (e.g., developing common rules on positive behaviour inside and outside the classroom) before resorting to more individualised methods of support. CIRCLE resources provide numerous practical examples of how students can be supported by the classroom teacher before getting external experts or special needs assistants involved.

Professionals and support staff assisting not only students but teachers. Inclusion works especially well in schools where special education teachers and other support staff assist not only the individual children with recognised SEN but also work within the mainstream settings and advise the regular teachers and school administrators. The Irish In-School Therapy Support model demonstrates how schools can be perceived as

the 'clients' of the support of OTs and SLTs, instead of individual learners.

Availability of easily applicable methodological resources. Several investigated practices focus on supplementing policy and theoretical literature on inclusive education with practical, evidence-based methodologies and tips for teachers. For example, CIRCLE resources help teachers and related personnel think systematically about key issues relating to children with additional support needs/disabilities in the classroom.[130] The manuals give teachers ideas as to what to do next if a certain strategy does not work, guide them through the referral process for extra support, as well as provide transparent documentation tools that ease communication with parents/caregivers.

Practice-oriented, tailored trainings and active learning. Motivating school communities to engage in inclusive practices becomes easier when they can learn actively and have access to easily applicable know-how. Mainstream education professionals report that visiting special schools or inclusive schools, or enrolling children with SEN in their own school, can help fight prejudice, accelerate learning, and inspire to work with such students (see, for example, the experience of Dovilai school in Lithuania). Networking, peer exchanges, and mentorship also appear to bring positive results in

building teachers' competence and confidence (see, for example, network-building activities by Italy's knowledge centre Erickson and Serbia's education authorities together with UNICEF). Italy's post-graduate training programme is a good example of combining diverse forms of learning, in a holistic and mutually reinforcing learning approach that includes theoretical teachings, laboratory activities, and internships.

Trainings aimed at teams of support organisers. Interviewees note that training and consultation are especially useful when delivered not only to individual teachers but a whole team of support organisers; involving multiple actors can bring a more holistic change in working culture. One-year trainings organised by Valteri Centre in Finland serve as a good illustration of such learning activities: with the help of a facilitator, multidisciplinary teams of support organisers (municipal and school staff) assess their needs, re-evaluate the municipality's values and culture and draw up development plans for the organisation of support (see Box 1).

130   Maciver, D., Hunter, C., Adamson, A., Grayson, Z., Forsyth, K., and McLeod, I. 2019. "Development and Implementation of the CIRCLE Framework." *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education,* 67(6), pp. 1–22. Available: https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912x.2019.1628185

Chapter 2.
Common challenges that prevent the transfer of knowledge

The findings from the case studies allow to distinguish several common challenges that prevent the transition to inclusive education and the successful transfer of knowledge to support it. These challenges can be broadly categorised as attitudinal and knowledge-related factors; factors related to legislation; and systemic factors related to governance, resources, and funding.

Legislation and strategic policy

Legislation supporting a dual education system by granting freedom for mainstream schools to refuse children with SEN/disabilities. Even if national legislation expresses a clear preference for mainstreaming, it often retains the right for parents/caretakers to choose segregated education settings for their children with SEN/disabilities and/or allows schools to refuse educating such children if they cannot grant sufficient support. Some national legislations are seen by interviewed stakeholders as granting too much freedom to mainstream schools to outright refuse to accept students with disabilities, resulting in high referral rates to special education (see case study on the Hoeksche Waard SWV in Netherlands for an initiative trying to solve this problem). Experts argue that such legal exceptions enable the long-term maintenance of a dual education system.[131]

No time-defined plans or monitoring to transition from segregated provision. Furthermore, even though all the investigated countries have ratified the UN CRPD, some governments still do not have a clear roadmap and time-defined pathway of transition to revise the role of special schools and eliminate segregating educational practices (such as the Netherlands and most German *Länder*). Special schools see supporting mainstream schools as an "add on" task, not its core responsibility (see examples of Lithuania and Slovenia, where small mobile teams are formed to assist mainstream schools).

Rigid academic curricula and assessments. The national education authorities often rely on regular curricula that are difficult to modify, and assessments that are organised narrowly, involving high-stake summative exams at the end of the education cycle, rather than low-stake formative assessments that take diversity into consideration. This creates pressure for some learners to enrol in special education, which means losing access to the regular curriculum and, in some cases, exclusion from mainstream classrooms. This is particularly relevant in secondary education, where the content and instruction tend to be more standardised and focused on academic achievement. In Slovenia, for example, legislation does not allow children with an adapted curriculum to be taught in the same classroom with students who follow the regular curriculum, in practice segregating them.

Governance

Compartmentalised approach: lack of dialogue-driven culture between professionals. In some localities, the time of teachers' and support staff is dedicated mostly towards direct teaching or targeted interventions, without coordinated planning or learning from each other. Moreover, in some cases, mainstream school educators and administrators do not feel obliged to follow the recommendations from external organisations, such as resource centres/special schools or knowledge centres. Interviewed staff of such organisations in Lithuania and Portugal notice that their unequal

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[131]   See, for example, Professor Andrew Byrnes' position on "parental right to segregate" in: Catia Malaquias, 2022. *CRPD requires Segregated Education to be Phased Out: Expert opinion for Disability Royal Commission Rejects Australian Government's Position.* Available: https://acie.org.au/2022/07/12/crpd-requires-segregated-education-to-be-phased-out-expert-opinion-for-disability-royal-commission-rejects-australian-governments-position/

status with teachers hinders their teamwork (they are sometimes perceived as unwanted auditors, rather than partners).

Lack of guidance on how support should be organised, leading to inefficiencies. For example, in Finland, national legislation's vagueness on who is responsible for initiating interventions, how to determine the type and duration of support, and in what settings (separate or mainstream), has caused ambiguity in some schools, thus making them hesitant to try out innovative pedagogical methods.

Support allocation, type and duration legally tied to diagnosis. Support allocation models, which require an external evaluation by medical/social welfare experts before allocating extra hours of teaching or therapy to the child can significantly delay needed interventions, as well as prevent support provision for students without an official recognition of SEN (e.g., in Lithuania and Slovenia).

Necessity to function with limited staff in some localities. Universal approaches applied by class teachers are not always sufficient and some pupils unavoidably require additional targeted or specialised support to succeed at school. However, some stakeholders report a lack of specialists (special education teachers, assistants, occupational and speech and language therapists, psychologists, etc.) to address these needs in a timely and systematic manner: waiting lists are a common issue at least in some localities (see case studies on Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia, Germany). A lack of specialists results in their limited and delayed involvement in the school's life, higher workloads, larger classrooms, and overall lower quality of inclusive education.

Inadequate allocation of time and human resources by school and local administrators. Some interviewees (e.g., in Serbia and Finland) note that insufficient levels of support are an outcome of inadequately placed resources and organisational issues (lack of horizontal and vertical cooperation between institutions, high levels of administrative burden placed on specialists and teachers, too much time spent on one-on-one support and small group teaching, too high of a dependence on special needs assistants, etc.), rather than a lack of funding.

Funding

Austerity policies. Austerity imperatives can severely restrict the allocation of necessary funding. This can exacerbate issues like scarcity of specialists in the education, social and health sectors due to low pay and precarious working conditions, associated with such job positions. Some interviewees have commented that policymakers often see inclusive education as a cost-saving measure. This can result in inclusive education projects being launched with unrealistic cost-saving ambitions, as was initially the case with the reforms in Bremen, Germany. Austerity is a concern even in countries that have long achieved high rates of inclusive education, for example, Italy. Assigning low political priority when "inclusion is already achieved" creates a risk of leaving children with disabilities in mainstream education without sufficient support.

Funding for additional learning support tied to individual children with recognition of SEN/disabilities. Schools are often reliant on strict categorical labels to trigger access to funding for additional support or intervention. Most European countries are still following support funding models that are based primarily on diagnosis rather than individual needs. Children with recognition of SEN are dedicated a specific number of hours of support per week from different specialists (e.g., in Lithuania or Slovenia). Because of this, the specialists' flexibility is limited, and they tend to see the assigned students individually or in small groups for the foreseen number of hours, which does not necessarily match the needs of the students or their teacher. Finally, children without a formal diagnosis may also need support, but they are not always entitled to it. This leaves aspects such as differences in ability, lower socio-economic status, migration background, language barriers, or interruption in learning due to moving/deployment or health issues, insufficiently considered.[132]

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[132] This was one of the observations made by OECD with regards to Portugal, but this issue is relevant for other countries as well. See: OECD. 2022. Review of Inclusive Education in Portugal. Available: https://doi.org/10.1787/a9c95902-en

Attitudes towards inclusive education

Lack of readiness for change, prejudices held in school communities. Many teachers, both in mainstream and special provision, still feel unprepared and/or unwilling to accept new roles and innovate with their pedagogical approaches. Teachers believe that accepting students with SEN/disabilities (esp. if they have behavioural issues or multiple disabilities) will add to their already high workload. Even when such children are accepted into mainstream settings, they often remain only physically integrated in the classroom. In worse cases, the preferred approach can be the removal of a perceived 'problematic' child from the class for most activities or offering to switch to home-schooling. On the other hand, negative attitudes from teachers and parents can stem from frustration and mistrust due to previous unsuccessful and under-resourced attempts at inclusion. Including children with disabilities in schools that are not prepared can indeed intensify experiences of exclusion and provoke backlash against making schools and systems more inclusive.

Too much focus on academic achievement in the education system. Schools' and/or educational systems' focus on academic achievements and standardised testing is a major obstacle to meaningful inclusion. Teachers, especially in secondary settings, often feel pressured to prepare students for high-stake exams and assign little priority to the well-being of students, modification of assessment techniques, or recognition of the students' achievements outside academic performance (this issue was particularly noticed by interviewees in Lithuania, Portugal, and Scotland). Emphasis on categorising students on the basis of their ability reinforces the idea of a two-track education system and may push some students to a special school/classroom after graduating a mainstream primary school.

Education of students with SEN/disabilities seen as "a task for support teachers". In some cases, mainstream teachers resort to delegating the care of pupils with disabilities to support teachers, as they see their responsibilities to be neatly separated. This can be interpreted as an outcome of traditionally separated tracks of pre-service trainings for regular classroom/

subject teachers and special education teachers (see case study on the Netherlands' Hoeksche waard SWV for an example of an initiative trying to modify this mindset).

Pedagogical models and training of support organisers

Specialist staff transferring medical model-informed practices to mainstream schools. One of the recurring issues across case studies is that despite international guidance, sometimes support for children with SEN still primarily draws on the psycho-medical paradigm (see case studies on Portugal, Ireland, Slovenia, Belgium's German-speaking Community). Special education is often influenced by the psycho-medical knowledge base, and has been described as diagnostic, separative, and help-based.[133] This approach to teaching is often criticised for not taking enough into account social and environmental factors. The psycho-medical model sometimes transpires to mainstream schools, which are often supported by special schools or resource centres that involve or rely on the experience of former special schools.

Preference for targeted deficiency-based interventions. Education practitioners, as well as some parents, tend to want "quick fixes" to "put out fires" and often expect specialists to work with children individually or in small groups, instead of making the general teaching practices more responsive to diversity, building in-house competencies, and involving the whole school community in the process. When it comes to behavioural problems of students (with or without SEN), education practitioners often resort to sanction-type responses and lack the skills needed to guide students in the right direction (see case studies on Finland's behavioural support model *ProKoulu* or mobile teams in Slovenia, which try to address this issue).

Inadequate in-service training for education staff and support organisers. While the concept of inclusion is surely not new to European education professionals, pre-service training for teachers continues to follow

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[133] Mitchell, D. 2005. *Contextualizing Inclusive Education: Evaluating Old and New International Paradigms.* Routledge.

separate training tracks (special and mainstream), whereas in-service trainings on inclusion often do not bring sustainable wide-scale results. One of the reasons behind it is that some of the available courses are inadaptable in real-life circumstances: they are theory-based, short-term, and aimed at a single teacher but not the whole team (including school leadership). Secondly, while numerous high-quality resources on inclusive education can be easily accessed, they attract education professionals already motivated to engage: various knowledge centres and higher education providers report that the level of interest in their training/advisory services varies depending on the personal motivation of the teachers or school leadership (e.g., in Lithuania, Italy, and Finland).

University training for teachers lacks orientation towards inclusive education principles. Initial training of teachers often does not include compulsory modules of inclusive education; higher education curricula are separate for special education teachers and mainstream teachers. This reinforces the idea that teaching students with SEN/disabilities is a responsibility of the special education teacher, whereas regular teachers are left without the knowledge or tools to support them. Meanwhile, attending regular courses (e.g., postgraduate programmes) can be costly and may require time off from teaching activities, which not all schools are willing or able to grant their teachers, nor all perspective teachers able to afford.

Section 3.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite widespread political endorsement of inclusive education, there is still wide variation across Europe in the status of special education settings, as well as the readiness of mainstream schools to accept *all* learners and, just as importantly, provide adequate learning environments and support measures that help maximise learners' potential. The goal of this study was to provide a collection of promising practices and policies for the transfer of knowledge to support the transition from special education to inclusive education. The 16 case studies presented in this report include a range of promising policies and practices broadly aiming to:

- Transform special schools to focus on assistance to students in mainstream schools and foster multidisciplinary collaboration (either through decisive reforms aimed at eliminating segregated education, or through incremental change);
- Gather and disseminate knowledge by developing and promoting practice-oriented methodological resources for educators and support service providers;
- Build school communities' competence and confidence through trainings, advice, capacity building to provide reasonable accommodation;
- Introduce operational models that effectively support learners' needs;
- Represent learners' and their families' voices in decision-making.

The common success factors and challenges found across the case studies allow to distil recommendations for different groups of stakeholders. The recommendations provided here are based on the authors' observations stemming from the case studies, interviews with stakeholders made throughout the study period, and various proposals on policy and practice made by international organisations, such as the EASNIE[134], EASPD[135], and the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[136]. The recommendations were validated with stakeholders from multiple countries and types of organisations during an online workshop in September 2023.

As the field of inclusive education is vast, the recommendations are non-exhaustive and focus primarily on the aspect of knowledge transfer to support the transition from special education to inclusive education systems. Moreover, the recommendations should be considered in a holistic manner, meaning that a lot of the proposed actions (in areas of legislation, governance, funding, training, etc.) are interconnected.

Conclusion 1

In some countries, mainstream schools can legally deny enrolling children with disabilities; parents/caregivers sometimes choose special education or homeschooling as a more suitable alternative for their children due to real or supposed lack of reasonable accommodation in mainstream schools. Transition to inclusion becomes speedier once mainstream schools have a clear mandate to accept *all* students, and there are clear strategies on de-segregation of education.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Express a clear preference for the minimisation of segregated provision. While many Member States continue to support a dual education system, the European Commission or related institutions should provide a blueprint policy framework unambiguously supports a single inclusive education system – i.e., education in regular classrooms of regular schools, with appropriate supports, not separate from

[134] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. 2022. *Changing Role of Specialist Provision in Supporting Inclusive Education: Final Synthesis Report* (A. Kefallinou, M. Kyriazopoulou, S. Ebersold, P. Skoglund, E. Rebollo Píriz and M. Lučić Wichmann, eds.). Odense, Denmark. Available: https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/CROSP_Final_Synthesis_Report.pdf

[135] European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD). 2021. *Lisbon Declaration on Inclusive Education*. Available: https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/EASPD_Lisbon_Declaration_FINAL.pdf

[136] UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2016. *General Comment No 4, Right to Inclusive Education.* Available: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD/C/GC/4&Lang=en

non-disabled peers. The framework could also foresee pathways for the transformation of specialist provision, drawing from promising examples of Member States.

maximum extent possible, in a manner that fosters their full social inclusion and participation. Monitoring frameworks of the extent and quality of inclusive education should be defined.

Conclusion 2

Participation of learners and their parents/caregivers in decision-making (both when deciding on policies and individual learning paths) can lead to better-informed, more effective, and transparent policies and interventions.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Improve monitoring efforts of the state of inclusive education across Europe. Some disadvantaged groups, such as young people with special education needs or disabilities, or young people from racial and ethnic minorities, remain invisible in regular cross-EU monitoring exercises. This limits the European Commission's ability to provide tailored recommendations to each Member State. Comparative and disaggregated data on inclusive education could be collected via the monitoring framework of the European Child Guarantee.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Ensure that National Child Guarantee Coordinators involve relevant stakeholders (including those representing children and their families) in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national action plans.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Close national legislation loopholes that allow mainstream schools to eschew their responsibility to provide inclusive education. Clear and unambiguous legal obligations must be put in place for mainstream schools to provide inclusive education. Education authorities should have a mandate to ensure that the child is getting the best possible support within mainstream settings, before considering specialist provision.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Involve learners with additional support needs and parents/caregivers in decision-making processes and offer advocacy and guidance for children to access their rights. National and local authorities should support the setting up of regional, and local groups representing learners' voices. They should also establish independent advocacy and legal support services for parents and children, in order to better protect their rights.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Develop policy strategies with time-defined targets and monitoring mechanisms for de-segregation. This includes creating a shared commitment, starting with the ministries responsible for education, to shift from institutionalised structures towards needs-based inclusive systems. Mechanisms should be foreseen to allow pupils with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the

Recommendation to support organisers[137]:

Ensure that the voices of learners and their families are included in decision-making, both when deciding on individual learning plans and transition pathways, and in the school's life in general. Engage with parents on setting individual goals for their children.

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[137]   Including education, social, and healthcare institutions.

Conclusion 3

While in some countries special schools have completely transformed their roles as additional learning support and care providers to mainstream schools, in other cases special and mainstream schools continue to function as two separate systems. Mainstream schools are sometimes unable to provide quality inclusive education due to insufficient levels of expertise, infrastructure, and resources to accommodate needs (most of which are concentrated in special schools).

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Ensure that the expertise accumulated in specialised settings can be utilised to support mainstream schools, where in-house resources and/or competences are insufficient. National and local authorities should incentivise special schools and mainstream schools to share resources and expertise, as well as provide guidance for special schools to work within the general education system.

Recommendation to support organisers:

Devise collaborative partnerships between education institutions (mainstream or special), as well as knowledge/support centres, to facilitate the sharing of expertise, resources, and best practices. The collaborations should not only revolve around support delivered directly to students (e.g., through mobile service teams), but also learning activities for the staff, such as peer exchanges, networks, study visits, mentorships, etc. School leadership should encourage staff to take on such learning opportunities.

Conclusion 4

In some areas and schools, multidisciplinary collaboration tends to be formal and lacks meaningful dialogue/knowledge transfer between professionals. Support providers (professionals such as special education teachers, psychologists, speech therapists,

rehabilitators, social workers or teaching assistants) tend to work mostly with individual students or are called-in to fire-extinguish crisis situations. They often lack the time, channels, and/or authority to support systematic whole-school changes.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Devise capacity building programmes (e.g., via European Social Fund or Erasmus+) where professionals from different disciplines are encouraged to participate together.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

At local level, introduce clear yet tailored organisational structures and internal monitoring mechanisms for the provision of support, with strong emphasis on multidisciplinary collaboration. This includes meaningful involvement of school leadership, teachers, experts from the social and health sectors, parents, and learners in the process of identifying needs, devising individual education plans, and reviewing their implementation.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Fund capacity building activities that involve teams of support organisers, including local education authorities, school administrators, teachers, assistants, and social/healthcare providers to develop holistic strategies for their area or school.

Recommendation to support organisers:

Develop clear cooperation mechanisms to provide additional learning support, where multidisciplinary teams of professionals have well-defined roles and learn from each other. This can also include assigning leaders for inclusion within local areas and/or schools to coordinate these processes.

Conclusion 5

Many teachers, both in mainstream and special provision, still feel unprepared and/or unwilling to accept new roles and innovate with their pedagogical approaches and continue to see students with and without SEN/disabilities as separate groups. Some education providers tend to resort solely to isolated interventions, informed by the medical model, whereas others are already prioritising adaptations to the learning environment as a foundation of inclusive education.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Provide funding via EU Funding Programmes for Member States and other partner countries to exchange promising practices and the latest innovations. This includes support for peer learning activities, networks, exchange visits, and other capacity-building exercises relevant for both institutional actors, like Ministries of Education and municipalities, as well as individual schools.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Conduct original research on best practices and provide Member States' relevant institutions with the tools to circulate already-existing research, with a particular focus on promising examples of transition, knowledge transfer, and use of innovative pedagogical methods for inclusive education. Education tends to remain organised at Member States level, and research and evaluation on this topic often remains confined within individual countries. EU institutions should promote the creation of databases of practices and support the translation of methodological and research material.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Provide professional learning opportunities to teaching staff that build bridges between mainstream and specialist provision. This includes embedding inclusive education principles in higher education programmes for future teachers, as well as in-service professional learning opportunities. Mainstreaming the idea that inclusive education is a responsibility of all teachers should be a key goal of communication towards, and training of, perspective teachers. Potential training topics may include universal design for learning, co-teaching and other innovative methodologies, as well as communication with parents.

Recommendation to support organisers:

Build shared agreement within the school community and partner organisations to work towards greater inclusion, starting with the leadership of the school and ending with learners and their families. Non-teaching staff should also be well-informed about the diversity of students and how to address behavioural problems of students.

Recommendation to support organisers:

Adapt flexible and innovative multi-tiered support systems, followed by routine observation and assessment, to match needs with interventions, track progress and adapt practice to ensure that learners achieve their goals. Prioritise universal-level adaptations and support measures delivered within the regular educational setting.

Conclusion 6

Rigid academic curricula and emphasis on academic achievement as the only indicator of education quality prevents full realisation of inclusion in education systems. Teachers' ability to modify the curriculum and assessment in accordance with individual needs facilitates the education of children with SEN/disabilities together with 'typical' learners. This can allow to avoid transferring students to an alternative special education curriculum and, in many cases, segregated provision.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Create flexible curricula, certification and modes of assessment and teaching, such as individualised education plans, to embrace diversity in student achievement and de-emphasise academic results as the main indicator of education quality. This is especially relevant for secondary education institutions, where the main aim of teaching and learning is often perceived as preparation for higher education and where teachers tend to be less inclined to engage in inclusive practices.

Recommendation to support organisers:

Recognise diversity as a benefit and celebrate success of different students, which may not necessarily relate to academic achievement.

Conclusion 7

Funding models that are strict and tied to official diagnosis of individual children tend to lead to inefficiencies, delay support, and hamper support delivery to children without a diagnosis but who nevertheless may benefit from additional support. Education providers benefitting from organisational autonomy and flexible funding models tend to be more effective with allocating support to students and adopting innovative pedagogical approaches.

Recommendation for European Institutions:

Promote research to identify pluses and minuses of different funding models across the EU and disseminate information about which funding model supports inclusion better, based on hard data. This may help national governments decide on the most appropriate funding models in their contexts.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Explore transparent yet flexible funding mechanisms based on educational needs rather than diagnosis.

Funding for additional learning support should be less related to labelling and should incentivise schools to innovate. Alternatives include approaches where funding follows the child, as well as lump-sum or hybrid financing models based on the total population of the school and, potentially, some other indicators (such as the social context of the school, number of pupils with certain needs, etc.).

Conclusion 8

Governments tend to allocate insufficient funding towards inclusive education, often seeing the phasing out of special schools as a cost-saving measure or perceiving inclusive education systems as self-sustainable once introduced. Moreover, inequalities in resource allocation may emerge depending on local contexts.

Recommendation to national- and local-level policymakers:

Ensure constant, reliable, growing funding for inclusive education: the experience of early adopters of inclusive education indicates that it is easy for governments to assume that once introduced, inclusive education can become self-sustaining. Instead, inclusive education not only requires robust and reliable funding, but also new investments, as societies grow more complex and diverse, and the number of children with recognised special education needs increases.

List of stakeholders consulted

Country	Organisation	Name	Position	Date	Form
Belgium	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education / Support and Accompaniment Unit, Department of Secondary Education, Catholic Network	Paul-André Leblanc	National Coordinator (French Community, Belgium) / Head of specialized education & adviser	3 May 2023	Online interview; email follow-ups
Belgium	Zentrum für Förderpädagogik / European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education	Dirk Schleihs	Director / National Coordinator (German-speaking Community, Belgium)	3 May 2023	Online interview
EU level	Inclusion Europe	Helen Portal	Advocacy and Policy Officer	18 April 2023	Online interview
EU level	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education	Mary Kyriazopoulou	Activity Manager	18 May 2023	Online interview
Finland	Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting	Iines Palmu	Development Coordinator	19 April 2023	Group online interview
Finland	Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting	Jukka Vetoniemi	Consulting Teacher	19 April 2023	Group online interview
Finland	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education / Finnish National Agency for Education	Pirjo Koivula	Country Policy Expert / Former (2004-2018) Counsellor of Education	2 May 2023	Online interview
Finland	Vuoksenniskan koulukeskus (school)	Ville Laivamaa	Principal	2 May 2023	Online interview
Finland	University of Eastern Finland	Hannu Savolainen	Professor of Special Education / Research group leader (*ProKoulu*)	9 May 2023	Online interview
Germany	ReBUZ	[Interviewed on conditions of anonymity]	High-ranking staffer of one of the four ReBUZ	23 June 2023	Online interview
Germany	Free Hanseatic City of Bremen	Meike Wittenberg	Senator for Children and Education; Inclusion Advisor to the Unit for Design tasks of general education schools and teacher training	5 July 2023	Online interview
Ireland	Department of Education and Skills / European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education	Brendan Doody	Assistant Chief Inspector / Representative Board Member	9 May 2023	Online interview

Country	Organisation	Name	Position	Date	Form
Ireland	National Council For Special Education / European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education	Gerard Hogan	Special Educational Needs Organiser / National Co-ordinator	12 May 2023	Online interview
Ireland	National Council For Special Education	Kevin Ryan	Project manager of School Inclusion Model	16 May 2023	Online interview
Ireland	National Council For Special Education	Brian Fitzgerald	Specialist Lead – Therapy Support (Acting)	26 May 2023	Online interview
Italy	Various schools in the Brescia province	Cristina Massoletti	Former Support Teacher	27 April 2023	Online interview
Italy	OSCARV (Observatory on Real/Virtual Communication with Adolescents) / MEDEA ONLUS (Educational Movement for the Right to Study / Various schools in Northern Italy	Beppe Berta	President / Former President / Former Teacher; education rights activist	2 May 2023	Scoping interview
Italy	IUL online university, formerly INDIRE	Massimo Faggioli	Professor of Inclusive Education	4 May 2023	Online interview
Italy	"Normativa Incusione", various volunteer initiatives	Flavio Fogarolo	Inclusive education activists and former teacher	4 May 2023	Online interview
Italy	Istituto Comprensivo "Daniele Spada", Sovere	Salvatore Lentini	School director	5 May 2023	Online interview
Italy	Foro Italico University (Rome 3)	Pasquale Moliterni	Professor, Director of the Specialisation Course for Support Teaching	8 May 2023	Online interview
Italy	Various schools in the Bergamo province	Pinuccia Spelgatti	Former educational assistant, teacher	9 May 2023	Scoping interview
Italy	University of Turin	Marisa Pavone	Professor of Special Pedagogy and Didactics	10 May 2023	Online interview
Italy	Istituto Comprensivo "Daniele Spada", Sovere	Anna Gelmini	Support teacher	25 May 2023	Group online interview
Italy	Istituto Comprensivo "Daniele Spada", Sovere	Chiara Catalini	Educational Assistant	25 May 2023	Group online interview
Italy / EU level	Edizioni Centro Studi Erickson/ University of Bolzano/Bozen	Dario Ianes	Founder/ Professor of Inclusive Education	20 April 2023	Online interview
Italy / EU level	Free University of Bolzano/Bozen	Silvia Dell'Anna	Researcher, inclusive education expert	4 May 2023	Online interview

Country	Organisation	Name	Position	Date	Form
Lithuania	Lithuanian Autism Association "Lietaus Vaikai"	Kristina Košel-Patil	Board chair, parent	20 April 2023	Online interview
Lithuania	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport	Ignas Gaižiūnas	Advisor to the Minister	20 April 2023	Online interview
Lithuania	Education Exchanges Support Foundation	Gražina Kaklauskienė	Deputy Director	20 April 2023	Scoping interview
Lithuania	Counselling Department for Children with Developmental Disorders	Gintarė Šatė	Director	2 May 2023	Online interview
Lithuania	Vilnius Šilas Special School	Artur Markevič	Teacher, consultant for mainstream schools	2 May 2023	Online interview
Lithuania	Dovilai School for Primary and Basic Education (Dovilų pagrindinė mokykla)	Arūnas Grimalis	Principal	3 May 2023	Online interview
Netherlands	Ieder(in)	Vera Meewis	Policy officer, inclusive education	26 May 2023	Online interview
Netherlands	Partnership for Appropriate Primary Education, Hoeksche Waard	Neely Anne de Ronde	Director	3 July 2023	Online interview
Netherlands / EU Level	European Disability Expertise & Academic Network of European Disability Experts/ Dutch Foundation for the Handicapped Child	José Smits	Advisor, Policy Analyst & Researcher	18 April 2023	Scoping interview
Portugal	Cooperativa para a Inclusão CECD	Miguel Valles	Executive Director	20 April 2023	Online interview
Portugal	Directorate General of Education (DGE) of the Ministry of Education	Filomena Pereira	Director of Special Needs Education Services	26 April 2023	Online interview
Portugal	Pró-Inclusão, National Association of Special Education Teachers	Margarida Loureiro	President	5 June 2023	Group written interview
Portugal	Pró-Inclusão, National Association of Special Education Teachers	Maria João Lopes	Member	5 June 2023	Group written interview
Portugal	Pró-Inclusão, National Association of Special Education Teachers	Isabel Borges	Member	5 June 2023	Group written interview
Portugal	Pais em Rede Association	Júlia Serpa Pimentel	President	15 June 2023	Group online interview

Country	Organisation	Name	Position	Date	Form
Portugal	Pais em Rede Association	Rosa Pacheco	Member, parent of young person with disability	15 June 2023	Group online interview
Portugal	Pais em Rede Association	Helena Sabino	Member, parent of young person with disability	15 June 2023	Group online interview
Serbia	Na Pola Puta (Association)	Marina Kurilj	Director	4 May 2023	Online interview
Serbia	UNICEF Serbia	Natasa Jovic	Policy Officer, Incusive Education	25 May 2023	Online interview
Serbia	Ministry of Education		Department of Promoting Human Rights in Education	5 June 2023	Email communication
Serbia	Elementary and secondary boarding school "Milan Petrovic"	Mirjana Lazor	Pedagogue	7 June 2023	Group written interview
Serbia	Elementary and secondary boarding school "Milan Petrovic"	Dragana Pašćan Stančetić	Coordinator of the Resource Centre	7 June 2023	Group written interview
Slovenia	School counseling office (Šolska svetovalnica)	Alen Kofol	CEO & school principal	4 May 2023	
Slovenia	Institute of Education of the Republic of Slovenia (ZRSŠ)	Natalija Vovk-Ornik	Head of Department for guidance of children with special needs	10 May 2023	Online interview
Slovenia	Jarše Youth Centre	Sanja Brezničar	Mobile services consultant	24 May 2023	Group online interview
Slovenia	Jarše Youth Centre	Tomislav Rikel	Mobile services consultant	24 May 2023	Group online interview
UK (Scotland)	Children in Scotland	Chris Ross	Project manager of the Inclusion Ambassadors	15 June 2023	Group online interview
UK (Scotland)	Children in Scotland	Lucy Johnson	Senior Development Officer – Enquire	15 June 2023	Group online interview
UK (Scotland)	Queen Margaret University	Dr Donald Maciver	Lead researcher in development of the CIRCLE Collaboration / Lecturer and Research Fellow in the Division of Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies	19 June 2023	Online interview
UK (Scotland)	West Dumbartonshire	June Johnston	Support teaching team member	19 June 2023	Online interview
UK (Scotland)	Gracemount Public School	Tamar Huxford	Deputy Head Teacher	26 June 2023	Online interview

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