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Input paper

Special Educational Needs? Working towards more Flexible Systems of Support to Meet all Learners' Needs

INPUT PAPER

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS? WORKING TOWARDS MORE FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT TO MEET ALL LEARNERS' NEEDS

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Introduction

The concept of Special Educational Needs (SEN) has evolved over time, moving from 'special education' to 'special needs education' (SNE), and more recently towards 'inclusive education'. Originally, special education focused on learners with impairments in separate institutions and settings. Special needs education broadened the scope to include various difficulties, still maintaining a deficit view. In contrast to this view, inclusive education assumes a paradigm shift, aiming to provide equitable and quality education for **all learners** alongside their peers, removing barriers to participation.

The concept of special educational needs was – and still is – a social and cultural construct. There has never been an agreed definition of SEN that can be used in country comparisons (EASNIE, 2022a). The number of learners identified as having SEN in each country varies because countries organise their systems of funding, provision, assessment and categorisation of disabilities and special needs in different ways (EASNIE, 2022b; Kefallinou, 2022).

This document discusses the evolution of the concept of 'special educational needs' and differentiates it with the principles of inclusive education. It then presents some key components of an equitable and inclusive education system by highlighting: the role of specialist provision within a continuum of support; the use of flexible funding and resource allocation models, and finally, the use of targeted measures to support diverse learner needs. These key components are supported with relevant examples of European policy and practice.

Deconstructing the concept of Special Educational Needs (SEN)

'Special education' and 'special educational needs'

The term 'special education' dates back to the 19th century. It was used to refer to the education of learners with perceived impairments who needed support from specialised staff, mostly in special schools or institutions outside the mainstream school system. The range and severity of a child's **'special educational need' (SEN)** was usually decided by comparing that child's performance with so-called 'typically developing children' of a similar age, often focusing on areas such as cognition, language, and social and emotional development. Generally, the cause of learning difficulties was considered to be within the child. This thinking reflects a 'deficit' view which has its roots in the medical model of disability. The medical model understands disability as a 'problem of the person, directly caused by disease, trauma, or other health condition, which requires medical care provided in the form of individual treatment by professionals' (WHO, 2002, p. 8).

Diagnosing difficulties and planning programmes of intervention and support attempted to make the learner fit the system rather than the other way round. Often, processes of identification, classification and referral to special services that aimed to meet the needs of learners with 'SEN' led to their exclusion. Specialised staff, rather than the class teacher, took sole responsibility for meeting the learners' needs and as a result, they were marginalised from the school/class community.

From ‘special education’ to ‘special needs education’

Over time, the terminology used moved from ‘special education’ to **‘special needs education’ (SNE)**, indicating a shift in thinking from a focus on the learner (special educational needs), towards a focus on the provision that may be needed by learners who experience difficulties at school (special needs education).

Definitions of special needs education in many countries were (and continue to be) based on an idea of normal distribution. In this model, education provides for *most* learners, with something additional or different for those considered to be of exceptionally high or low ability. The idea of special educational needs now extends beyond learners with disabilities to include learners who appeared to be failing in school for a wide variety of reasons – for example, children living in poverty or those from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Special needs education, however, continued following the deficit or medical model that still saw the problems as being within the learner and as needing to be addressed through compensatory measures (Hurst, 2003 and Bunbury, 2019, in EASNIE, 2022a).

In parallel, the term ‘integration’ was used from the 1970s up until the 2000s and was seen as the opposite of segregated special schooling and continued to be linked to disability. Learners with special needs were expected to ‘fit into’ the usual practices and approaches of mainstream education, being ‘normalised’ or ‘assimilated’. This focus on ‘placing’ learners with special needs into mainstream schools continued with little regard for the quality of the education. In practice, learners in so-called integrated settings spent much of the day away from their peer group in special units. For some countries, however, integration did encompass a wider view with some interpretations that shared some principles with inclusion.

A move towards inclusive education

In most European countries, the thinking behind inclusive education has grown out of discussions around the issues previously mentioned such as specialist segregated provision, integration, and mainstreaming.

International declarations began to express the need to commit to non-discrimination in education. For example, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), Articles 28 and 29 obliged the countries that signed and ratified it to ensure the right to free and compulsory primary education for all children and to respect children’s backgrounds (e.g., family, cultural identity, language, values, etc.). It also underlined, in Article 23, the need to provide free education for the ‘special needs of a disabled child’. A year later, the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) called on countries to remove educational disparities. In 1994, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), commonly known as the *Salamanca Statement,* marked the beginning of a journey towards inclusive education. It called on all countries and international organisations to move towards inclusive schools for all and ‘new thinking in special needs education’ (ibid., p. 9). The Salamanca Statement had a strong influence on national and international policy documents that signposted several key guiding principles.

In 2006, the UNCRPD (UN, 2006) provided further support for inclusive education. Article 24 on Education set out ‘the right of persons with disabilities to education’ and required States Parties to sign and ratify the Convention to ‘ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning’. The UNCRPD, like the Salamanca Statement, required all persons with disabilities to be included in the education system, with access to inclusive, quality, and free education in the communities in which they live, with an entitlement to individualised support in mainstream settings. The Convention also introduced the concepts of 'discrimination on the basis of disability' and 'reasonable accommodation' (ibid., Article 2), which are essential elements for inclusive education.

A decade after the UNCRPD, General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) was issued. It further clarified inclusive education and the obligations on State Parties stemming from Article 24. In particular, General Comment No. 4 stated that the 'exclusion of persons with disabilities from the general education system should be prohibited' (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, p.6) and that the UNCRPD 'is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: a mainstream education system and a special/segregated education system' (ibid., p. 11).

Following these policy developments at international and European level, inclusive education has developed from a single-layered concept, focused on 'mainstreaming' learners with disabilities or special needs into regular schools (UNESCO, 1994), to a multi-layered concept. As UNICEF (2017) puts it: 'Inclusive education involves transforming the whole education system - legislation and policy, systems for financing, administration, design, delivery and monitoring of education, and the way schools are organized' (p.3). It is concerned with developing **equitable quality education systems for all learners** by removing barriers to their presence in mainstream schools, full participation in school and community, and achievement of valued goals (including those wider than academic learning) (Council of the European Union, 2018; 2021).

Inclusion, then, requires a move away from a concern with the categories a learner may or may not fall into, to **focus on the systemic barriers** experienced by some learners that lead to marginalisation and exclusion. Inclusive education is a political aspiration and an educational methodology, closely connected to the principles and actions of fairness, justice and equity. It goes beyond 'mainstreaming' and aims at providing a barrier-free learning environment for all learners, regardless of their individual differences (Kefallinou, 2022).

Despite this new way of thinking, many countries continue to use categorical descriptions of SEN/disability or some process of classification to determine eligibility for services, to plan for special needs education and to gather data about the effectiveness of services provided[1]. Recent evidence indicates that 32 out of 35 European countries use the label of 'learners with disabilities', 'special needs' and 'learning difficulties' in their policy and

[1] The European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education (EASIE) provide focused data that informs country policy priorities on inclusive education. The EASIE Data Tables provide numeric data relating to: a) children/learners in recognised forms of education; b) children/learners educated in inclusive settings; c) the placement of children/learners with recognised special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive settings or otherwise. An **inclusive setting** is operationally defined as a recognised form of education where the child/learner follows education in mainstream classes alongside their peers for the largest part – 80% or more – of the school week. The 80%time placement benchmark clearly indicates that a child/learner is educated in a mainstream group/class for the majority of their (pre-)school week. At the same time, it acknowledges possibilities for small group or one-to-one withdrawal for limited periods of time (i.e., 20% or one day a week). All previous Agency data collection exercises have used this benchmark.

legislation (EASNIE, 2022a). Labelling learners' needs around 'SEN' is still prevalent, but at the same time, many countries are moving towards other types of categorical approaches that consider *wider learner needs,* deriving from various social inequalities or circumstantial factors. For example, some countries' legislation refers to 'socio-emotional difficulties' (14), 'national minorities' and 'cultural diversity' (8) or 'socio-economically disadvantaged background' (7). A few countries include categories addressing learners who are 'migrants, refugees and newly arrived' (5), have 'age-related issues' (4), have 'experience of crisis or trauma' (2), are 'out of education' (2), show 'delinquent or criminal behaviour' (2), or are 'living in remote, rural, or disadvantaged areas' (1) (ibid).

There is also increasing recognition of the need to take account of ***intersectionality*** – the interconnected nature of all social categorisations – when considering the needs of all learners (Nadan and Korbin, 2018). According to OECD (2020):

> …the extent and degree of intersectionality of different forms of diversity with SEN are not only restricted to binary interrelations; rather, various forms can coexist and interact (p.20)

These forms of diversity can include one or multiple forms of the following: gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, religion and other beliefs and attitudes (UNESCO, 2020a) as well as national minorities, indigenous people, and giftedness (Varsik, 2022).

Countries currently face the problem of framing their legislation and policy so that they clearly aim to ensure the full participation and success for all learners while avoiding labelling individuals or groups of learners.

Learners vulnerable to exclusion

As already presented, the dilemma of whether or not to use different labels is evident in countries' legislation and policy documents, implementation strategies and plans, and in their monitoring and data collection activities (EASNIE, 2022a).

In reality, the challenge is the same, regardless of context:

> … Inclusion cannot be achieved one group at a time … Learners have multiple, intersecting identities. Moreover, no one characteristic is associated with any predetermined ability to learn (Antoninis et al., p. 104).

In this sense, inclusive education 'requires the rethinking and reconceptualization of education and of ALL elements within it' (Hunt, 2020, p. 6). It can be considered as 'an organising principle' that underpins all school structures and processes (EASNIE, 2017a). This emphasises the need to move away from categorising learners – potentially based on medical models – and having an overall focus on all **learners vulnerable to exclusion** from education (Ainscow et al., 2006).

The term 'learners vulnerable to exclusion' is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and is far broader than that of special educational needs (UNESCO, 2020). It covers the widest range of different groups of learners and all the factors that may negatively affect their learning opportunities. It encompasses all learners whose educational experience is impacted upon by a number of pressures, forces, levers, discriminations and disadvantages. These learners may or may not fall into categories of special needs and a special type of provision may or may not be available to support them. This term encapsulates the broad vision and rights-based approach of including all learners in inclusive education. Using the term 'learners vulnerable to exclusion' supports policy development towards the broader vision of inclusion (EASNIE, 2022a).

Inclusive education as a preventative approach

Countries work towards the vision of inclusive education in different ways, depending on their historical, political and societal contexts. However, problems of inequality and discrimination within the education system persist (Eurydice, 2020). While many laws and policies promote inclusion, implementation remains complex, and 'special needs education' practices still prevail (such as identification and assessment of individual needs and individualised approaches).

The goals of inclusive education are most effectively met when policy and practice **prevents** different forms of educational exclusion before they happen; **intervenes** to ensure that good quality inclusive education is available for all learners at all times; **compensates** with specific actions and provision when prevention and intervention are not enough to ensure learners' needs are adequately met in inclusive settings (EASNIE, 2018a; 2019a; 2021). These three policy actions of Prevention-Intervention-Compensation (the 'PIC' model), are in line with European-level work and wider thinking about educational quality (European Commission, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2011; 2022).

However, it should be noted that an inclusive education system is, at its core, **a preventative system**, prepared to support all learners reach their full potential and to overcome various barriers to learning wherever they arise. The effective implementation of inclusive education systems requires clear policy mechanisms that take a prevention policy approach and aim to avoid educational exclusion (Watkins, Donnelly and Meijer, 2023). It is acknowledged that compensatory policy approaches may also be necessary for some learners and, hence, are commonly used by countries. However, 'compensatory policy actions and measures should be a last resort' (EASNIE, 2019a, p.24).

To develop an inclusive education system, a combination of national/regional and local policies, school organisation, and understanding and responding to individual circumstances is essential (Lyche, 2010). A conceptual model that includes those elements is the eco-system model which the European Agency has adapted from the work of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) (EASNIE, 2017b; 2019a). According to this model, an inclusive education system consists of the following inter-related systems:

- The *micro-system* includes processes within the school and learner interactions with peers and adults. It considers whole-school approaches and learner-centred practices that can increase school attendance and engagement.
- The *meso-system* reflects inter-connections within the micro-system that influence school structures and systems. It encompasses school-level interactions that can help to ensure equitable learner opportunities.

- The *exo-system* encompasses the community context, which may influence other levels. It focuses on local community actions that can contribute to learner engagement and achievement.
- The *macro-system* represents the wider social, cultural and legislative context that includes all other systems. It includes national/regional actions for promoting inclusiveness (EASNIE, 2019a).

According to this model, schools cannot be viewed as independent/self-sufficient entities. Their success is strongly embedded within the system they operate in and highly dependent on their **collaboration and interaction with different stakeholders across the wider-education system**. Cross-sectoral approaches are required to link education and training policies with employment, finance, youth, health, justice, housing, welfare, and other services (Truszczyński, in Edwards and Downes 2013, p. 7). Thinking of inclusion through this 'organisational' perspective is helpful in order to develop an inclusive system where all learners – including those most vulnerable to exclusion – receive a high-quality education. This perspective also goes beyond school organisation, aiming to address inequity to assure wider community participation and transition to a stable adulthood (EASNIE, 2019a).

Policy approaches for flexible systems of support

Specialist provision and placement approaches

At the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s the term 'provision' was referring to the type of setting (mainstream or special/segregated) used to educate learners with SEN (EASNIE, 2013). At that time, member countries[2] could be divided into three main groups: **one-track, two-track or multi-track**, according to where most learners with SEN were educated. In the one-track approach, learners with SEN were mostly educated in mainstream settings; in the two-track approach, there was a strong division between special and mainstream settings and learners with SEN were mostly educated in segregated settings. In the multi-track approach, multiple approaches and placements were identified, with learners being educated in a mixture of mainstream and special schools (EASNIE, 2003).

According to Florian (2005), in a time dominated by an inclusive agenda, the idea of special education as a parallel or separate system of education needs to be abandoned. In the current policy climate that favours inclusion, European countries are moving away from the segregation model, since it is recognised and conceptualised as discrimination and as not adhering to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). They are making efforts to translate inclusive principles into practice, by taking different approaches to specialist provision. The term **specialist provision** is used to refer to any type of additional education, assessment and guidance services *for any learner in need*, along with further resources for schools, teachers and families. It can take the forms of in-school provision, external support, and special schools. These services involve various groups of specialists covering special education, social welfare, rehabilitation, health, early

[2] The Agency has 31 member countries, covering 36 jurisdictions (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as Belgium's French, Flemish and German communities are each represented separately). Iceland, Norway, Serbia, and the UK are additional to the 27 countries which are part of the European Union (Romania is not included in the Agency member countries)

intervention, personal development and transition pathways within the education system (EASNIE, 2019b).

Trends in European education show that countries with a two-track approach (education in a mainstream school and education in a special school) are moving towards a multi-track system, offering a continuum of services between the two approaches. To develop **a continuum of support**, countries are actively developing policies to reconceptualise and re-organise specialist provision in ways that support inclusive education. Their main policy reforms are oriented towards:

➔ *Promoting a rights-based and preventative approach*. Moving towards a rights-based approach involves a change in educational culture from a focus on individual support (often based on a medical diagnosis), to a flexible system that supports schools to increase their capacity and capability to respond to the diverse needs of *all* learners. Rather than trying to 'fix' learners, by providing compensatory support to fit them into existing arrangements, schools are seeking to transform their organisation, teaching and classroom environments to **respond in flexible ways** and work towards preventative approaches.

➔ *Reshaping the relationship between the mainstream and specialist sector.* In many European countries, special schools are developing into resource centres to support mainstream schools. The **transformation of special schools into resource centres** ensures knowledge exchange between professionals in the specialist and mainstream sectors, contributing to professional development and further support for both learners and teachers.

➔ *Developing flexible support systems*. Countries are also focusing on developing a continuum of support that is backed up by **flexible allocation of human and financial resources** with the effective translation of national policies to regional, local and school levels (EASNIE, 2019b) (see more details in the following section).

Funding and resource allocation models

Models for funding education can vary widely in incentives, structure and outcomes (Meijer, Soriano and Watkins, 2003). In 1999, a review of international approaches to special needs education (Meijer, 1999) described different categories of indicators for funding education: **input, throughput and output** (refer also to EASNIE, 2016a; Fletcher-Campbell et al., 2003; OECD, 2020).

- *Input funding* is when the funding is based on identified needs, such as the number of learners with special needs in a school, municipality, or region. Inputs may also be defined in terms of referral rates, low achievement scores, the number of disadvantaged learners and so on. The key point is that funding is based on the -expressed or measured- learner needs (EASNIE, 2016a).

- *Throughput funding* is based on the services provided by a school, municipality, or region. It usually determines the number of learners eligible for funding and decentralises the allocation and management of funds at sub-central levels (OECD, 2020).

- *Output funding* is based on the results achieved. Funds are channelled to mainstream and special settings on the basis of students' learning outcomes

(EASNIE, 2016a). According to OECD (2020), the output model represents the least common financing scheme.

Countries still use these models in some combination: service-based funding from central government to municipalities, needs-based funding from municipalities to schools, etc. Other combinations are also possible and visible in practice (EASNIE, 2018b).

The Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems (FPIES) project (EASNIE, 2016a) links funding systems to a **three-level framework of support**, known as the 'Response to Intervention model' (See National Center on Response To Intervention). In this framework, three main funding systems (general, throughput, input) is linked to different levels of intensity of intervention/support (see Figure 1 below).

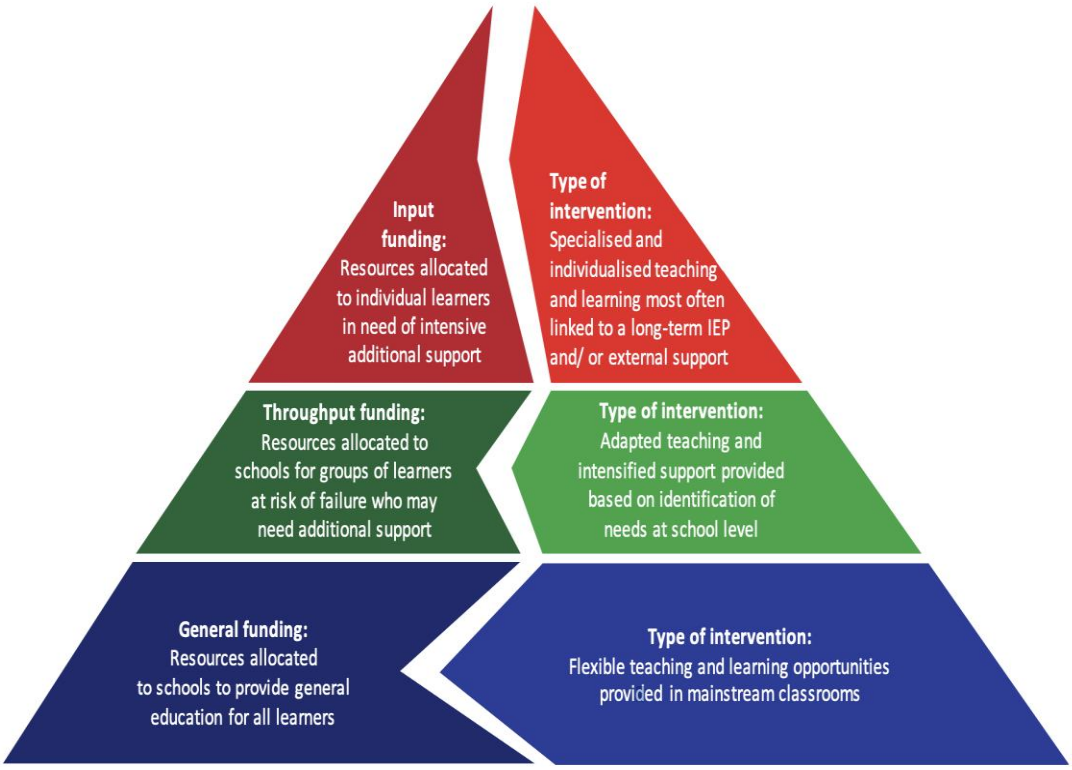

Figure 1. Resource allocation mechanisms for supporting learners in need

- The *first level* of resourcing encompasses spending dedicated to the education of all learners, i.e. those who are not in need of support or for whom schools are considered able to act inclusively without any extra support in the mainstream education classroom.
- The *second level* of resourcing includes extra funding that enables schools to provide intensified support for learners experiencing difficulties in coping with school demands and who are at risk of failure. These resources are allocated to schools and may be related to the throughput model described earlier.
- The *third level* of resourcing is targeted at learners in need of the most intensive support. They face the greatest long-term challenges in meeting educational demands. Schools may face difficulties in adequately addressing these learners' educational needs through second-level intensified support in classrooms and may

require additional means and/or external support. Resources may be allocated to learners as a result of formal identification and may be associated with input-based funding (as explained above) (EASNIE, 2016a).

As a principle, all types of support should be available and provided in mainstream schools. The first level of resourcing can be seen as a form of *prevention*, the second as a form of *intervention* and the third as *compensation*. Countries that use predominantly funding approaches of the third level are focused mainly on compensation.

The FPIES analysis (EASNIE, 2016a) highlighted the following **key issues for financing systems for inclusive education:**

- Current modes of funding in countries encourage the labelling of learners. The prevailing funding approach is demand-driven and prevents special schools from acting efficiently as resource centres.
- Flexibility in the financing must be linked to the principles of universal design that focuses on learning environments designed for all learners (in terms of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy) and provides extra support when needed.
- In many countries, there is a lack of data for monitoring existing inclusive education policies. Weak or inadequate reporting mechanisms hamper policy-makers' attempts to link funding mechanism outcomes with effectiveness issues.

It has been recognised that models fostering a more decentralised funding system can lead to better outcomes in terms of monitoring and effectiveness (EASNIE, 2016b). However, given the diversity and the complexity of funding models, one cannot argue in favour of an ideal model, as each one has advantages and disadvantages (Meijer, 1999; NCSE, 2014; UNICEF, 2012).

In terms of cost-efficiency, inclusive schools are likely to be less expensive than segregated schools (OECD, 2020; UNESCO 2009). However, the effective implementation of inclusion requires significant investment and a rethinking of existing funding schemes (OECD, 2020). In this effort, it is important to acknowledge that funding mechanisms are better understood or judged within the context in which they are applied (Levacic and Downes, 2004). It appears that a combination of models would be desirable to allow effective inclusive education to be implemented (EASNIE, 2016b).

Targeted support measures to support diverse learner needs

Effective support for vulnerable learners is based on **whole school approaches** that focus on continuous inclusive school development. The following policies and strategies are found to improve learning and teaching **of all**, with a particular benefit for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners:

➔ *Developing an inclusive pedagogy to enable all teachers to promote the learning capacity of all learners.* Inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that aims to overcome differences between learners by extending the options that are available to everybody, rather than differentiating activities only for some learners (Spratt and Florian, 2014); It seeks to move away from practices that involve comparison, ranking or labelling and beliefs about fixed abilities (Swann et al., 2012) (**See Annex, section 1).**

- ➔ *Developing more authentic, flexible and accessible approaches to curriculum and assessment.* While EU countries have legal provisions for inclusive curricula, key questions on why and how learners are assessed still lack an inclusion dimension (UNESCO, 2021). A recent approach has been one of designing the education system from the perspective of 'Universal Design', previously used in Architecture (Mace, 1988). This approach can address the diversity of learner needs by suggesting flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessment processes that support educators to meet varied needs (Refer to Rose and Meyer, 2002 and Centre for Applied Special Technology, no date). For Universal Design to happen, schools and teachers need to be given greater **autonomy** on adapting and selecting learning materials and deciding how the curriculum can be delivered (UNESCO, 2021). For instance, ensuring that everyone can take part in a range of school activities – within the taught curriculum and in extra-curricular activities (**See Annex, section 2).**
- ➔ *Using evidence-based classroom practices*. Research has shown that specific teaching strategies, such as direct instruction and feedback (Faubert 2012); making use of flexible and heterogeneous learner groupings (Flecha, 2015); collaborative teaching or co-teaching (i.e., the presence of two teachers or teaching assistants in the class) (Cook and Friend, 2004); peer tutoring and collaborative learning - characterised by collaboration, creative processes and the use of new technologies- (Paavola et al., 2012), are all effective strategies for including all learners and promoting their success (EASNIE, 2016c; Kefallinou et al., 2020; Mitchell; 2014; Hattie, 2009) **(See Annex, section 3).**
- ➔ *Providing targeted support programmes.* Such programmes may be preventative and focus on specific learner or school needs. For example, the provision of psychological support to promote mental health; the use of targeted language learning programmes to support learners with a migrant background (see Siarova, 2022); other preventative programmes to support all types of violence, discrimination and /or conflict prevention etc. Promoting well-being, in particular, has been receiving much attention in the post-pandemic era as it has been shown to increase learner motivation, a necessary condition for school success **(See Annex, section 4 and Eurydice report on Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe).**
- ➔ *Working with stakeholders in and around schools.* The use of multi-disciplinary teams that includes workforce professionals (school social workers, counsellors, school psychologist, nurses etc), has been a key strategy in many countries' policies. To achieve the goal of inclusive education, countries are also making efforts to increase participation of learners, families and communities, which are found as key components in an inclusive education system (EASNIE, 2022c; Kefallinou et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021) **(See Annex, section 5).**

Conclusions

This paper discussed the paradigm shift and the on-going dilemma related to inclusive education: how to balance holistic education based on universal design, while catering for the needs of learners requiring targeted support (without labelling them). It also highlighted the growing need to take account of intersectionality – the interconnected nature of all social categorisations – when considering the needs of all learners.

Inclusive education challenges the concept of special needs education as ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’ the education provided for most learners. Despite this, it has often replicated rather than replaced the structures and processes of special needs education. This shows the importance of sharing **clear understandings of both language and underpinning ideology with all stakeholders.** Otherwise, new terms (‘inclusive education’) may replace old (‘special education’) with little or no change in policy and practice (European Agency, 2015a).

The Agency’s Key Principles report identifies the need for *a single legislative and policy framework* with five requirements:

1. Flexible funding and resource allocation
2. Clear governance through all system levels
3. Comprehensive quality assurance and accountability with a focus on equitable opportunities for all learners
4. A continuum of teacher professional learning
5. Inclusive curriculum and assessment frameworks for all (EASNIE, 2021).

If all of these components are present, then all levels of the education system should work together to become more equitable, effective and efficient in valuing learner diversity and improving the achievement of all learners.

ANNEX: EXAMPLES OF EUROPEAN POLICY AND PRACTICE

1. Developing an inclusive pedagogy to enable all teachers to increase the learning capacity of all learners

1.1 The 2018 Inclusive Education Law for Portugal's Schools

Portugal's 2018 Inclusive Education Law provides some of Europe's most innovative and genuinely inclusive resources for the future. Since 2018, Portugal has been moving away from the rationale that it is necessary to categorise learners to provide appropriate support. This decree-law provides a continuous and integrated approach to the school path of each student, assuring quality throughout all compulsory schooling.

The preceding Decree-Law has evolved since its origin in 2008, in accordance with Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Since 2009, most of Portugal's special schools have been converted into Resource Centres for Inclusion (CRI). CRI provide specialised support through their specialised professionals to schools, teachers, families and students. CRI facilitate access to education, training, work, leisure, social participation and autonomy. A national network of 25 Information and Communication Technology Resource Centres (CRTIC) has also been established to support mainstream schools. CRTIC assess the pupils' needs, at the request of the schools, for the purpose of granting the assistive products/devices to access the curriculum.

The key features of the Decree-Law 54/6 July 2018 require schools to provide a multidisciplinary team to support inclusive education. It is the responsibility of the multidisciplinary team to:

- raise awareness of the educational community towards inclusive education;
- propose the students' learning support measures be mobilised;
- follow up and monitor the implementation of the learning support measures;
- advise teachers about the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices.

This Decree-Law foresees a new school support structure, the Learning Support Centre (LSC). The specific objectives of the Learning Support Centre are:

- to promote the quality of students' participation in the activities of the class to which they belong and in other learning contexts;
- to support the teachers of the group or class to which the students belong;
- to support the creation of learning resources and assessment tools for the various components of the curriculum;
- to develop interdisciplinary intervention methodologies that facilitate the processes of learning, autonomy and adaptation to the school context;\
- to promote the development of structured environments, rich in communication and interaction, which promote learning;

- to support the organisation of the transition process to post-school life.

Individual schools must document how their inclusive culture values diversity. All students with Individual Educational Programmes must have an Individual Transition Plan in place three years before the end of compulsory schooling. This plan will promote the transition to post-school life and, whenever possible, to the establishment of a professional activity.

With this law on inclusive education, together with supportive political measures that continue to take place, Portugal is progressing towards truly inclusive schools.

(Source: https://www.european-agency.org/news/innovative-new-inclusive-education-law-portugals-schools)

1.2 Bilingual inclusive education in Madrid, Spain: Deaf and hearing pupils

The Ponce de León Education Centre in Spain has been implementing inclusive education for both deaf and hearing learners since 2003. The main aims of the initiative are to support the personal development and abilities of all learners, including both deaf and hearing individuals. There is an emphasis on comprehensive education catering to the educational and communication needs of the entire community, including oral language, sign language, and alternative systems. It is guided by the principles of inclusive education, focusing on presence, participation, and learning for all. The key components of the centre's work are:

- Bilingual Education: Deaf and hearing learners share two languages in the classroom - oral language and sign language.
- Specialised Teachers: The centre employs teachers who specialise in sign language and oral language.
- Speech Therapists: These professionals facilitate communication development and curriculum access through inclusive practices.
- Continuous Development: The centre continuously evolves its methodologies, spaces, and classrooms to foster real inclusion.

The implementation followed a new model of attention for deaf learners which was introduced in 2004, incorporating bilingualism (oral language and Spanish Sign Language - LSE) from early childhood education through primary school. Professionals were trained in bilingualism and the use of LSE. Implementation also involved collaboration with specialists and support from the Montemadrid Foundation.

The evaluation process considers both internal and external evaluations of learners' development in various aspects, including social relationships, acquisition of oral language, and acquisition of sign language. Results indicate that bilingual education supports the acquisition of LSE in both deaf and hearing learners. Annual knowledge tests and external evaluations consistently yield good academic results.

More information can be found here: https://www.inclusive-education-in-action.org/case-study/bilingual-inclusive-education-madrid-spain-deaf-and-hearing-pupils

2. Developing more authentic, flexible and accessible approaches to curriculum and assessment

2.1 The Curriculum for Wales

The Curriculum for Wales framework guidance was first published in January 2020 and has undergone significant changes and reforms. The Curriculum for Wales is the framework that sets out what learners in Wales should be learning in schools. It is designed to be more flexible and learner-focused, aiming to provide a more holistic education that goes beyond traditional subjects. It aims to help each school develop its own curriculum. Schools and settings are encouraged to draw directly from the guidance online.

A phased approach for implementation of the new curriculum has been adopted since September 2022. All schools are required to roll-out their new curricula arrangements by September 2026. As the curriculum is rolled out, schools should consider how their curriculum should be revised in response to the learning needs of their children and young people.

Key features of the Curriculum for Wales include:

- The Four Purposes: The curriculum is designed around four key purposes:
    1. Ambitious, capable learners: Learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives.
    2. Enterprising, creative contributors: Learners who are ready to play a full part in life and work.
    3. Ethical, informed citizens: Learners who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world.
    4. Healthy, confident individuals: Learners who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.
- Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs): Instead of traditional subjects, the curriculum is organised into AoLEs, which are broader areas that encompass various subjects. These are: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy, and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; Science and Technology
- Progression Steps: The curriculum includes progression steps that outline what learners should know and be able to do at different stages of their education.
- Assessment: There is a focus on assessment for learning, where assessment is used to support and guide learning rather than simply for grading and ranking students.
- Cross-Curricular Learning: The curriculum encourages cross-curricular learning experiences to help students make connections between different areas of knowledge.
- Digital Competence: Digital competence is integrated into the curriculum to prepare learners for the digital age.

More information can be found here: https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/

2.2 Increasing vocational options at Calderglen learning community, UK-Scotland

Leaders and teachers at Calderglen school (Scotland, UK) have developed a wide range of masterclasses and courses leading to national qualifications. These include some practical and vocational options to provide choice and meet a wide range of learner needs and interests. They include: painting and decorating, cosmetology, patisserie, electronics, songcraft (composition), Radio Calderglen, design of computer games, fashion design, media, make-up, outdoor learning, art academy, photography and puppet theatre. These options can help to motivate learners, improve attendance, inform career choices, contribute to other subjects and allow them to gain qualifications needed to enter college. Masterclasses are often initiated by teachers who have a particular talent/interest, so this also provides motivation and engaging leadership opportunities for staff.

A range of vocational pathways in the senior curriculum also supports the principle that learning is better *in context* – and that vocational courses provide a real and valued alternative to university. This practical approach engages learners who may otherwise be at risk of leaving school early and gives them a greater awareness of the realities of the future job market. The Calderglen curriculum includes work placements and an introduction to work qualification for learners with additional support needs (ASN), as well as college link and taster programmes. The development of school/employer partnerships includes a Foundation Apprenticeship in Engineering in association with East Kilbride Group Training Association. This allows learners to attend a workplace/training provider for two days per week

(More information can be found here: Key Actions for Raising Achievement Guidance for Teachers and Leaders).

3. Using evidence-based classroom practices

3.1 Embedding Team-Teaching in Support of Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education in Ireland

Co-teaching or team-teaching is where two teachers teach in the same classroom at the same time, for multiple but identified purposes. The policy development in relation to team-teaching has been evolving in Ireland since the concept was first introduced in 1993. While not a new concept, team teaching was addressed anew in Ireland as a result of a greater focus on teacher collaboration.

The first policy challenge was to provide quality inclusive learning environments for all students. It aimed to reduce the dependency on a model of student withdrawal from class, which potentially ran counter to accessing a quality and equitable educational experience. The second policy challenge was to adopt a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach, which saw classes being supported by additional teachers to enhance learning for all students by all teachers. In this case, the focus was on a dividend/preventative approach rather than on a deficit/reactive approach.

The initial target group of the initiative was students aged 12–16 who were at risk of not learning and of not attending school. This initiative started as a small case study with one

Education and Training Board and has influenced the development of team-teaching at classroom, school and national levels. Workshops continue to be run at the local school level and through the above-mentioned activities, such as seminars and summer schools. It is now forming an integral part of initial teacher education programmes.

For students, some of the outcomes associated with the work include:

- students attaining higher results at state examinations than previously predicted;
- improvements in literacy and numeracy scores from pre- and post-testing; - students identifying the team-taught subjects as their favourite subjects;
- improvements in students' attendance, engagement, participation, confidence and pride in their work, as well as improvements in their attitude to learning and in their attitude towards themselves and others.

For teachers involved, some of the outcomes associated with effective team-teaching include:

- learning in real time, in real classrooms, in real contexts;
- developing an enhanced sense of professional belonging and well-being;
- forming new professional relationships;
- learning new methodologies and also returning to forgotten practice.

Two national reports on initial teacher education show team-teaching as possessing significant benefits in the career of emerging teachers and those who support them in school placement (Hicks et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2018).

For more details see:

https://www.inclusive-education-in-action.org/case-study/embedding-team-teaching-support-inclusive-and-equitable-quality-education-ireland

4. Providing targeted support programmes

4.1. Welfare services in Finland

In Finland, the Student Welfare Act includes two levels of learner welfare: common welfare services and individualised welfare services. Learner welfare for all is primarily preventive and supports the school community as a whole. It aims to promote learning, well-being, health, social responsibility, interaction and participation of learners. It also promotes the wholesomeness, safety and accessibility of the learning environment. Individualised welfare focuses on the learner. Services are based on the learner's right to sufficient support in resolving difficulties. This means access to school health services, social workers and psychologists, and other multi-professional services implemented by a team of experts. Multi-professional teams of experts come together if needed to clarify individual learner needs for support and to organise appropriate services

(Source: EASNIE, 2019a).

4.2 Language-awareness in Finland

In Finland, language awareness has been included as a topic for the whole school community approach in the core curriculum for basic education. Each community and community member is multilingual. Parallel use of various languages in the school's daily life is seen as natural, and languages are appreciated. The Listiac Project develops and experiments a theoretically informed reflection tool aimed at making (future) teachers more linguistically sensitive in their beliefs, attitudes and actions. A cross-curricular language aware pathway has been developed as part of the class teacher curriculum in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä. The aim of this pathway is to provide a recognisable reference point for students as they progress through their educational studies and explore what is meant by the 'every teacher is a language teacher' mandate written into the national curriculum for basic education in Finland. Read and download the full report here.

(*Source: Siarova, 2022, p.21)*

4.3. Supporting refugees at times of transition in Malta

Refugees under the age of eighteen who arrive in Malta unaccompanied by adult relatives are considered as learners at risk. Support measures are aimed at eliminating or reducing the educational disadvantage that such students experience due to linguistic, social, and cultural barriers. Supporting measures include the following:

1. Social workers who prepare care plans to help such children integrate in mainstream institutions and to prepare individual transition programmes;
2. Specific language support for such children to learn Maltese and/or English;
3. The raising of classmates' awareness of the child's native language, customs, beliefs and ethnic diversity in order to facilitate the child's inclusion in class;
4. Liaison with non-educational social welfare institutions to ensure that such children and their families enjoy the basic living requirements.
5. Continuous assessment of such children within the Maltese education system and society at large.

Source: CSM report, p. 39 + Eurydice

5. Working with stakeholders in and around schools

5.1 Serbia's National Association of Parents and Teachers

The National Association of Parents and Teachers of Serbia (NARNS) was developed with the support of the Open Society Foundations, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education in Serbia. NARNS aims to develop a platform for discussion and a culture of respect and co-operation between parents and teaching staff. Parents and teachers work together on topics such as social inclusion, health and safety of children, transition of children from pre-school to the school education system, tolerance and fostering inter-culturalism, emotional literacy, which altogether influence the development of a positive school climate and improve education. NARNS also acts as a ‘broker’ between parents, teachers and the education system.

NARNS gathers representatives of three communities – professional associations of educators, parents’ associations and representatives of school clubs of parents and teachers, and school and municipal parents’ councils – as structures that enable joint co-operation of parents and educators within schools. There is a network of 12 city clubs of parents and teaching staff. The city clubs co-ordinate with local networks of clubs established in schools and pre-school institutions. They also work with the Roma community. So far, there are more than 80 school clubs, with over 4,500 active members.

Mutual trust between parents and teachers is established through joint activities, shared ownership and joint organisation of activities in schools. A team of transparently selected regional counsellors supports parents and teachers in establishing new clubs and strengthening the existing clubs and city networks throughout Serbia.

(Explore more country examples in the Voices Into Action Toolkit)

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