European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools, Sub-group on Pathways to School Success

How to support schools in their journey towards more inclusive education for all? Building school leaders' and teachers' capacity as key agents of inclusion

PLA REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under its 2021-25 mandate, the **Working Group Schools, Pathways to School Success sub-group**[1], supports the implementation and follow-up of the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success[2], which aims at reducing underachievement and early leaving from education and training and promoting well-being at school.

The Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in Malta focused on building the capacity of school leaders and teachers to foster inclusive education and was held in May 2024. During the PLA, participants from 13 Member States engaged in discussions to address the challenges and share strategies for fostering inclusive education. The PLA emphasised four core dimensions of capacity building critical for achieving inclusive education:

1. School Culture and Ethos: A positive school culture is fundamental for inclusivity. Schools need a shared vision and planning process that involves all stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and the broader community. The creation of an inclusive ethos requires collaboration, clear legal frameworks, and policies that support diversity. Schools should implement bottom-up approaches that allow all voices to contribute to the inclusion strategy. Leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering this environment, ensuring that inclusion is seen as a collective responsibility.

2. Effective Needs Identification and Resource Allocation: Effective needs identification is crucial for supporting diverse learners. Schools should have robust mechanisms for identifying student needs early, involving multidisciplinary teams, parents, and educators in the process. Tools and strategies must be developed to support diverse learning needs, avoiding the pitfalls of labelling. Data-driven approaches are essential, and educators require training to use these tools effectively. Ensuring adequate resources, both human and financial, is vital for sustaining these mechanisms.

3. School Capacity to Innovate and Adapt: Schools must be flexible and adaptable, able to innovate and implement programs that meet the varied needs of students. This includes integrating vocational and alternative learning pathways, such as those seen in Malta, which cater to different student interests and abilities. Creating learning communities and knowledge hubs at local and national levels can facilitate the exchange of good practices and support ongoing innovation. Encouraging collaboration between schools, universities, and other stakeholders helps build a more resilient and adaptable education system.

4. Training and Support for Key Education Agents: Continuous professional development (CPD) and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) are crucial for equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed for inclusive teaching. Training should focus on developing core competencies such as equity, inclusion, and adaptive pedagogy. Effective support systems, such as mentoring, peer learning, and access to specialised training, are necessary to help teachers and school leaders navigate the complexities of inclusive education. An emphasis on social and emotional skills is also needed to foster a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

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[1] The Working Group comprises representatives from all Member States, EFTA and Candidate countries, international organisations, and stakeholder organisations.

[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022H1209(01)

The PLA underscored the importance of integrating these dimensions within a whole-school and whole-system approach. Building capacity across these four dimensions is essential to creating inclusive education environments where all learners can thrive. This strategic focus contributes to the broader goals of the European Education Area, ensuring equitable and high-quality education for all students.

ABOUT THE PLA

The mandate of this Working Group (WG) on Schools 2021-2025 is to support the implementation and follow-up of the 2022 Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success by promoting mutual learning and the exchange of practices. Within a whole-school and whole-system approach to tackling underachievement and early leaving from education and training, in the last months the WG has been exploring the topic of targeted support for more vulnerable/at risk students, focusing on the question: "How to strike a balance between holistic education, catering for the needs of all learners, and targeted support for more vulnerable learners but avoiding labelling and stigma"?

Through meetings (26 September, 26-27 October 2023 and 19-20 January 2024) and an online seminar (24 April 2024), the WG has addressed the questions from different perspectives (from needs identification to resource allocation and other measures to help schools respond effectively to the different pupils' needs). Acknowledging the need for combining universal approaches with more targeted ones, the WG has highlighted that targeted policy responses will only work effectively in an inclusive and comprehensive education system that is structured around the aim of ensuring all students' well-being and chances to succeed; a system which is flexible enough to adjust quickly and respond to the increasing diversity of pupils in classrooms across Europe.

The PLA in Malta was an important step in this "journey". With its emphasis on building teachers' and school leaders' capacity, it aimed to explore one of the key pillars of inclusive education and come up with concrete proposals for recommendations, hence contributing to the WG deliverable on this topic.

In this context, 13 Member States met in Malta between 15 and 17 May 2024 to discuss those specific questions. The participants were asked to examine the overarching challenge of balancing holistic education that caters to the needs of all (but risks leaving behind some groups as their vulnerabilities remain unnoticed) with targeted support (but avoids labelling).

Specifically, this PLA was dedicated to the pivotal role of **capacity-building for school leaders and teachers to empower them to create inclusive learning environments for all children**. During these 2.5 days meeting in Malta, the WG members were asked to focus on these specific objectives:

1. Achieve a better understanding of the **challenges faced by educational practitioners** in developing inclusive learning environments and the necessary conditions to address these challenges effectively.

2. Identify ways to **build the capacity of schools, namely school leaders and teachers**, to create more inclusive environments that attend to the complex needs of diverse vulnerable learners, both at the school and system levels.

3. **Bridge the gap** between inclusive education policy objectives and the inside-the-school reality, to foster education environments where no learner is left behind.

Core dimensions

In preparation for the PLA, the following dimensions have been highlighted as crucial to build the capacity of schools, school leaders, and teachers to create inclusive and equitable environments.

1. School culture and ethos – a crucial element in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments.

2. Effective needs identification mechanisms and necessary resources to sustain them – needs identification mechanisms require diverse and continuous resources (funding, human resources in and outside schools, partnerships and cooperation, national resource centres).

3. School capacity to innovate and adapt to individual learner needs in a context often marked by rigid structures (e.g., curriculum, traditional classroom setup, insufficient autonomy, administrative and bureaucratic load, rigid professional roles, funding schemes).

4. Training and support to key education agents (namely school leaders and teachers) – both initial teacher education and continuous professional development (CPD).

The following report will highlight the insights gathered from the discussions in the country workshops, the 'food for thought' sessions, the school visits[3], and the world café harvesting sessions on the last day (see PLA agenda in the Annex 1). The report is structured around three elements: key messages from the 'food for thought' sessions, reflection on challenges faced by both countries and educational practitioners in the area of capacity building discussed throughout the PLA and findings and key messages relevant to each of the four dimensions the PLA was focusing on: school culture and ethos, effective needs identification mechanisms and resources, school capacity to innovate and adapt, and training and support for key education agents.

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[3] The agenda of the PLA is available in the annex.

1. KEY MESSAGES FROM THE FOOD FOR THOUGHT SESSIONS

Institute for Education, Malta

The PLA was hosted by the Ministry of Education of Malta and the Institute for Education (IFE), which has been established nearly 10 years ago to provide **alternative pathways to teacher profession** in Malta. It offers a diversity of accredited programs, including bachelor's and master's degrees and micro-credentials. It provides pedagogical qualification to those teachers who lack formal qualifications and offering professional development to all teachers, as well as other professionals who would like to transition to teaching profession.

IFE curricula are very diverse and incorporate inclusion and equity themes in their courses, e.g., modules on fostering equity, social justice, and multicultural education. These modules are fully integrated into initial teacher education and designed to accommodate the growing diversity in school populations in Malta.

IFE also offers CPD programmes to schools, which receive customised professional development sessions. Educators have access to Individual Professional Development Plans (IPDP). Free sessions on topics such as mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and digital competencies are available for educators and parents.

The institution conducts and publishes research to inform educational practices and professional development. It hosts annual symposia on themes like multiculturalism, technology-enhanced teaching, and educational neuroscience[4]. Additionally, it engages in collaborative projects and prepares for Erasmus + exchanges to foster international educational exchanges.

Regarding quality assurance and accreditation, programs are peer-reviewed and accredited by external universities and the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority. Internal quality assurance is maintained through observations, internal verifications, and performance reviews linked to employee assessments.

The institution offers flexible admission requirements, including a maturity clause for applicants over 23 years old. Part-time and blended learning options are provided to accommodate working professionals. It **strives for inclusivity by adapting learning environments and schedules to individual needs**, including medical and personal circumstances.

EASNIE, Capacity Building for inclusion

EASNIE introduced two programmes, TPL4I and SISL, which focus on building teachers' and school leaders' capacity for inclusion.

In Teacher Professional Learning for Inclusion (TPL4I), the goals are to **identify policy priorities, necessary policy elements, and frameworks for TPL for inclusion based on international and European research and needs**.

EASNIE offer several recommendations for TPL for Inclusion at different education system levels:

National/Regional Level:

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[4] This year, they host the 5th Annual Symposium of the Institute for Education which will be held on 23rd October 2024. It will focus on the theme 'Minds and Machines Unite: The AI symposium'. More information: https://ife.edu.mt/5th-annual-symposium-2024/

- Monitor language of equity and inclusion.
- Bridge gaps between different stages of educators' careers.
- Design a continuum of support for education professionals.

Community Level:
- Foster collaboration.
- Align vision and strategic plans with professional learning needs.
- Offer effective strategies.

School Level:
- Address all staff involved in teaching and learner support.
- Facilitate mutual learning and support.

Individual Level:
- Create flexible and adaptable professional learning paths.
- Supporting Inclusive School Leadership

The second project is [Supporting Inclusive School Leadership](#) (SISL). It follows the principle that **inclusive leadership goes beyond organisational roles to address inequity, build community, and ensure full participation and high-quality education for all learners**. The project aims to investigate **how to develop and promote inclusive school-level leadership through national and local-level policy frameworks and support mechanisms**. To do this, three key questions guide the project activities:

- What policy frameworks are required to develop and support inclusive leadership across the whole education system?

- What are the essential competences needed for effective inclusive leadership practice at school level?

- What support and professional development opportunities are required to develop and sustain effective inclusive school leaders?

At the individual level, inclusive school leadership influences learner-centred practice, supports innovative pedagogy, and ensures the use of data for ongoing improvement. At the school level, it guides school organisation and resources, engages the learning community in self-review, and provides professional development opportunities. At the community level, it builds partnerships with support agencies and manages human resources with a vision of inclusion. At the national and regional levels, it influences national policy development and translates and implements policies appropriately.

OECD, Supporting Teachers and School Leaders for Diversity and Inclusion

The OECD presentation highlighted that efforts to promote equity and inclusion depend on **high-quality teachers who are prepared to support increasing diversity**. This can significantly impact both academic and non-academic student outcomes.

Key elements of inclusive teaching are inclusive pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and core competences such as critical reflection, global competence, and a growth mindset (which enhances student motivation and performance, especially for disadvantaged students). Inclusive pedagogy **supports all students' sense of belonging and engagement** without singling them out. The inclusive curriculum **incorporates diverse perspectives and voices**, recognising teachers' cultural frames of reference. Inclusive assessment **uses formative and summative assessments tailored to diverse learning styles**.

Core competences for inclusive teaching **involve critical reflection, which helps teachers acknowledge biases and implement strategies to minimise their impact**.

Supporting inclusive teaching requires targeted policies such as:

- Inclusive admission processes aim to attract diverse teacher candidates through financial and non-financial incentives.

- Teacher residency programs provide continuous support from initial teacher education (ITE) to professional practice.

- Continuous professional learning includes induction, mentoring, and professional learning communities.

- Teacher appraisal involves well-designed evaluations to improve teaching practices and reward performance.

- Teacher well-being prioritises socio-emotional learning competences and supportive working environments.

The presentation also highlighted that there are several challenges to inclusive teaching, which include diverse understanding and implementation of inclusive education across countries, insufficient teacher preparation and continuous development in diversity and inclusion, high-stress levels and turnover rates among teachers, particularly in disadvantaged settings, and a lack of diversity in the teaching profession with imbalances in gender, ethnicity, and cultural representation.

Challenges of inclusive teaching

Different understanding of diversity and inclusion	**Low attraction and retention** of diversity in the teaching force	**Insufficient teacher preparation and development** for diversity and inclusion	**Teacher well-being** is not always prioritised	**Lack of solid and inclusive teacher evaluation** for diversity and inclusion
Globally, 57% of countries **define inclusive education** for multiple student groups and only 17% have **holistic policy frameworks** to inclusive education for all students (UNESCO, 2020).	Imbalances with respect to **gender, age, diverse abilities, ethnicity** and other groups (e.g. TALIS 2018). Students in **more disadvantaged** settings are less likely to have high-quality teachers (Qin and Bowen, 2019).	**Novice teachers** are over-employed in more disadvantaged settings (TALIS 2018). Teachers have **high needs for training** in areas of diversity and inclusion (PISA 2018 & TALIS 2018).	Teachers with **high stress levels** are twice as likely to report they will quit teaching within 5 years (TALIS 2018).	15% of teachers report providing **feedback** based on peer observation more than 4 times a year (TALIS 2018). Teachers from minority backgrounds seem to **score disproportionately lower** in teacher evaluations (Bailey et al. 2016).

Source: OECD's presentation , Supporting Teachers and School Leaders for Diversity and Inclusion (2024)

To address these challenges, strategies for inclusive education include recruitment and retention policies that offer financial incentives like loan forgiveness and scholarships, as well as non-financial incentives such as professional learning communities. Professional Learning Communities enhance teacher competences in diversity and inclusion through collaborative problem-solving and reflection.

Inclusive school leadership promotes collaboration and professional learning, engaging with external stakeholders to support diverse student needs. Building capacity involves continuous professional learning programs for school leaders to foster equity and inclusion.

ATEE, Between Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Italian Teacher Education Programmes

ATEE's presentation focused on the evolution of the vision from integration to inclusion in Italy's education system, which has been marked by significant legislative and policy changes over the decades:

- The Integration Era began in the 1970s with Act 517/1977, which aimed to integrate pupils with disabilities into regular schools. This involved removing special classes and introducing special education teachers (*insegnante di sostegno*).

- The 1990s marked a shift towards inclusion. The Decree of 1998 introduced more structured training for Special Education Teachers. For primary education, this meant an additional one-year course with specific special education courses. In secondary education, the first integrated courses were introduced during general ITE. Teacher qualifications advanced to the university level, with degrees required for primary (four-year) and secondary (two-year post-master's) education.

- By the 2010s, comprehensive inclusion policies were established. Act 170/2010 introduced new rules for Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), requiring Personalised Educational Plans. Teachers were required to complete 31 ECTS in special needs integration topics. Decree 2012 expanded the inclusion strategy to cover all Special Educational Needs, including social, economic, linguistic, and cultural difficulties. The national plan for in-service CPD highlighted "Inclusion" as a priority.

Current inclusive initiatives include new programs aimed at supporting students' transition from school to vocational pathways, with an emphasis on school orientation and vocational guidance. A proposed law advocates for an inclusive teacher in all schools to ensure comprehensive support for diverse learners.

These key developments highlight **Italy's historical progression from integration to inclusion**, **emphasising the evolution of teacher education and continuous professional development to support inclusive practices**. The focus remains on equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the diverse needs of all students through structured training and collaborative practices.

2. CHALLENGES FACED BY THE COUNTRIES ON THE WAY TO BUILD PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY FOR DIVERSITY

This section is based on the discussions held across different sessions of the PLA in Malta. Participants highlighted numerous challenges that education actors face in building their capacity for inclusive education. A significant issue is the **shortage of teachers**[5] coupled with an ageing workforce and a lack of diversity within the profession. This adds to the issues highlighted by OECD such as low attraction and retention rates, resulting in an imbalance with respect to gender, age, diverse abilities, and ethnicity.

Groups at risk face unique challenges. In some countries, it was shown that the integration of immigrant children is **hindered by a lack of teacher capacity and competences to work with these students effectively**. Educators often feel unprepared to handle the demands of diversity and inclusion. Limited resources and resource overload further strain the system. In some countries, the limited availability of teachers can make the management of diverse needs challenging. Innovative programs are costly and often the first to be cut, leaving students without necessary support.

This is amplified by the fact that the classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, which is especially visible in larger cities as they see higher numbers of migrant students, necessitating educators to **embrace and support this diversity actively**.

The **higher numbers of students with special educational needs** across various schools and classes presents another challenge. As ensuring equality in quality education across classrooms is challenging, especially in smaller municipalities where student numbers are low.

Moreover, there is often a **lack of dialogue between academia and educational practitioners**; some countries have highlighted the fact that the government outlines necessary competencies for teachers but doesn't provide detailed guidance on the balance between initial teacher education (ITE) and continuous professional development (CPD). Additionally, there is a lack of transfer of knowledge between highly specialised special educational schools and mainstream schools, which hinders the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Further complicating the landscape is the **lack of solid and inclusive teacher evaluation systems and the fragmentation of state actors** responsible for teacher training.

The **concept of inclusion itself is still not mainstreamed in many places**, and the evolving nature of inclusive education adds to the complexity. Initially focused on integrating students with disabilities, the definition now includes other forms of diversity like LGBTQI+ identities, migration backgrounds, and varied social contexts. This expanded scope sometimes clashes with entrenched stereotypes, leading to conflicts within the educational environment.

Teacher wellbeing is another critical issue. According to the OECD, teacher wellbeing is not always prioritised, impacting teachers' ability to support students effectively. Additionally, the compartmentalisation of knowledge remains a challenge. Teachers are expected to integrate knowledge across disciplines, yet their training and practice often remain compartmentalised.

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[5] A NESET report on *Evidence-based Solutions to Teacher Shortages* is availble here https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/tackling-teacher-shortages/

3. FINDINGS ON THE CORE DIMENSIONS OF CAPACITY BUILDING

This chapter builds on the insights gathered from the discussions in the country workshops, the 'food for thought' sessions, the school visits, and the world café harvesting sessions on the last day and reflects on the core questions posed at the PLA as introduced above.

2.1. Nurturing inclusive school culture

Building an inclusive school environment

During the presentation by the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE), it was highlighted that inclusion is fundamentally a **cultural issue**. While financial resources are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. A cultural shift must occur within the school environment, particularly among teachers. This can be linked to the challenge highlighted above, where inclusion-related concepts might not be clear to all school actors.

Therefore, it was underlined that schools should offer some form of **planning for inclusion**, which would deliver a common understanding of inclusion, shared by the entire school community. This shared vision can be made possible if the policymakers create the conditions and the time for effective school planning and self-evaluation. There is therefore a need for a **legal framework which delivers a clear vision for inclusion and a long-term perspective,** ideally accompanied by simple guidelines. The legal framework must be developed and reviewed continuously by all stakeholders (including at the local level), which should be actively involved in the actual implementation.

> **Example**
>
> During school visits, the MS observed the enhancement of multicultural environments through activities such as food festivals. The visited schools displayed a very positive culture, which felt authentic, warm, and progressive.

> **Example**
>
> During school visits in Malta, it was observed that students with special needs blend seamlessly with their peers. They do not stand out, thanks to the discreet presence of support teachers. This approach fosters a more inclusive atmosphere, allowing all students to feel integrated without highlighting their differences.

Indeed, it was highlighted that a **bottom-up approach** is crucial for fostering an inclusive school environment. The "Pacte d'excellence" in French Community of Belgium is a notable example. Here, many stakeholders are involved in the process[6]. Each school creates a steering plan, identifying its weaknesses and strengths and developing an action plan to address these areas. A delegate of contract objectives ensures that everyone, including teachers and school leaders, collaborates on the school plan. Students also have the opportunity to voice their opinions, ensuring a more inclusive planning process.

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[6] This stakeholder consultation is highlighted in the history of the pacte which is available at this address: https://pactepourunenseignementdexcellence.cfwb.be/le-pacte/

Role of the school leaders

It was regularly highlighted that **school leaders are key actors in the development of inclusive schools**. According to the OECD, inclusive school leadership is crucial for promoting both a positive school culture and a professional learning environment. ATEE highlights the significant role of school leaders and administration in ensuring that inclusion is managed flexibly to avoid resource overload. Class organisation depends on the collaboration between school leaders and students.

The school leaders also have a strong role to play in creating a **collaborative environment**. This involves developing a culture where all stakeholders work together, value diversity, and ensure that all learners, especially those most vulnerable to exclusion, receive a high-quality education. This can be done through initiatives such as team-building activities, developing the school's CPD needs, implementing shared leadership, or effective communication with authorities.

Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (EASNIE)

The overall goal of the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership project is to investigate how to effectively develop and promote inclusive school-level leadership through national- and local-level policy frameworks and support mechanisms. In this context, EASNIE has produced a literature review, a policy review, a country survey and a self-reflection tool (among other deliverables).

Leaders work to ensure learners' full participation and engagement by setting clear directions and developing staff competences and collaborations with other stakeholders. A good balance between the standards school leaders are held accountable for, and the policy support provided is crucial. The policy framework and self-reflection tools aim to support self-reflection, review and further develop existing policies, and contribute to the creation of new policies aimed at achieving inclusive education.

Example

In Czechia's Strategy 2030+, a pedagogical leader is specifically defined as a competent and self-confident educator who aligns with educational policy trends, values education, understands the needs of the school, and has a vision for its development. This leader listens, communicates, and cooperates with stakeholders, motivates by example, and creates conditions for success. They are responsible for implementing strategic measures and communicating the school's vision to the community. Emphasising the role of school principals, the strategy highlights the need for strong management skills, comprehensive initial education, and continuous professional development. The goal is to enhance educational quality and ensure equal opportunities for all students through effective leadership.

Strongs links with the community, vertical communication

Building links with the community is essential for fostering inclusion and enhancing social integration in vulnerable urban areas. For example, in Norway, areas-based initiatives focus on cooperation to mobilise local communities and participants, creating new networks and arenas for collaboration. The initiatives aim at mobilising local communities and creating new networks and arenas for cooperation across sector lines and government structure, private and civil sectors.

Building a school community where resources and dilemmas can be discussed is crucial. Croatia shared an example that highlights the importance of networking. Teachers share their activities, involve researchers, and conduct peer-led lectures. This collaborative approach allows teachers to showcase their differentiation strategies and discuss their needs openly.

Parental engagement is vital for building an inclusive school culture. During school visits, the active involvement of parents in primary schools was noted. Parents were seen leading presentations and initiatives, demonstrating their commitment to being part of the school community.

The need for **vertical communication is essential**. Dialogue between the Ministry (policy level) and schools should be open and accessible, reinforcing that the Ministry is not just an abstract entity but has real, approachable faces. There is a need to listen to the voices of teachers and learners, establishing a structured dialogue to ensure their perspectives are considered.

It was highlighted that the method of communication is also important. For example, it is crucial to simplify information on inclusion by creating a single webpage at the Ministry level that consolidates all relevant information. Additionally, the policy level should focus on collecting and disseminating examples of "practices of reference," a term used in Portugal instead of "good practices," to share effective strategies and inspire other schools.

Key messages on supporting schools in building school culture and ethos

Key message 1 : Establish a Coherent Legal Framework for Inclusion and ensure it includes flexible guidelines

STEPS:

- Mobilise Taskforces: Form taskforces that include parents, trade unions, migrants, people with disabilities, and other relevant stakeholders. These task forces should identify gaps, analyse existing documents (including international ones), and allow sufficient time for discussion (e.g., three months as practised in Portugal).

- Align Understanding on the Inclusion Process: Ensure that every teacher is recognised as an inclusion agent. Clearly define what it means to be an 'inclusion agent' to align understanding across the education system.

- Align Legal Acts with Inclusion Principles: Review and adjust every legal act to align with the principles of inclusion. Remove any exceptions or contradictory clauses that undermine these principles.

- Ensure the Law Evolves: Recognise that inclusion is a continuous process. The legal framework should be regularly debated, reflected upon, and updated to remain effective and relevant.

Key message 2: Develop School Plans/Vision for Inclusion

STEPS:

- Unified Strategy and Steering Plan: Each school should adopt a unified strategy and define a Steering plan, similar to the approach used in French Community of Belgium. This plan should outline clear objectives and goals for inclusion.

- Formulate a Contract of Objectives: Engage in a collaborative process involving school leaders and teachers to formulate a contract of objectives. This ensures that all stakeholders are aligned and committed to the inclusion vision.

- Allocate Sufficient Time for Implementation: Allow a sufficient time period for the implementation of the plan to ensure that the strategies and objectives are effectively integrated into the school culture.

Key Message 3: Establish Vertical and Horizontal Structured Dialogue

STEPS:

- Create Space/Platform for Feedback: Develop platforms for feedback on new reforms and policies. This space should allow for open public consultations (OPCs) and other forms of stakeholder engagement.

- Facilitate effective policy-practice-research transfer through structured communication channels.

- Be Receptive and Act Upon Feedback: Ensure that feedback collected through these platforms is taken seriously and acted upon. This includes incorporating insights from practitioners and researchers to refine and improve policies and practices.

Key Message 4: Facilitate dissemination of Knowledge/Good Practices

STEPS:

- Optimise Information Sources: The Ministry should create one central repository for knowledge and good practices. This centralised resource will ensure that all stakeholders have access to consistent and reliable information.

Key Message 5: Foster Professional Learning Communities and Relevant CPD/ITE

STEPS:

- Integrate Inclusion into Training: Ensure that the new legal framework and definition of inclusion are cascaded into continuous professional development (CPD) and initial teacher education (ITE).

- Acknowledge Time Requirements: Recognise that this integration process takes time and requires ongoing support and adaptation.

- Promote collaboration among school staff and between schools, to create professional learning communities where knowledge and practices are continuously exchanged.

2.2. Effective needs identification mechanisms and resources

Analysing the child's needs

During the discussions, it was highlighted that external experts, such as **social assistants and multidisciplinary teams**, play a crucial role in supporting student needs. Peer counselling within schools helps teachers handle complex issues, providing a support system that reduces the burden on individual teachers.

Effective communication with parents is crucial. It is important to communicate professionally, explaining how their child's needs can be supported both at school and at home. Diagnoses must involve parents, health professionals, and schools, with the multidisciplinary teams having the final say. Indeed, it was highlighted that the school context should be paramount in determining the method of support, emphasising that core decisions should come from within the school rather than from external sources.

In this context, it was shown that opening schools to collaboration with private sectors, and NGOs, actively supported and coordinated by local councils, can provide more flexible approaches to education. NGOs can offer innovative solutions and additional resources.

It is essential to **include the children's voices in this process**. Schools must listen to their needs and ensure they have the resources to address them.

Inclusive pedagogy

The discussion highlighted that the needs identification process must **minimise labelling and focus instead on specific needs**. This is done through inclusive pedagogy and involves providing individual support without treating students differently. Inclusive assessment should consider diverse needs and learning styles. The curriculum must also be inclusive, ensuring all students can access and benefit from it.

Therefore, ITE must offer courses that address different aspects of education so that teachers feel prepared. Practical tasks and critical thinking must be integral parts of these courses, preparing educators to handle diverse classroom needs effectively.

Example

Institutions like IFE offer courses that address different aspects of inclusive education. For instance, there is one Master's dedicated to teaching students with disabilities and one focused on how to address adolescents with divergent behaviours.

Data and tools

Effective data use is essential, and teachers need proper training on how to interpret and apply data to benefit students. Principals should foster a research-led perspective among teachers, ensuring data is used to inform teaching strategies and support student learning.

The MS discussed the need for concrete tools and strategies to identify specific needs as early as possible. In their opinion, **early detection of student needs** should ideally begin in kindergarten, even if formal documentation is not yet created.

They also highlighted that strong screening tools, such as pre-literacy screening, are vital for quick responses. The steps include observation, screening, identification, and strategy implementation if

needed. It's important to avoid scattering these efforts. Teachers need training to understand and use these tools, emphasising a research-oriented approach. School leaders should be charged with creating a culture of research and understanding of needs, positioning themselves as leaders of learning.

Key messages on supporting schools in the effective identification of needs

Key Message 1: Clear Roles and Responsibilities in Needs Identification and Consistent Communication Process

STEPS:

- Create a Procedure: Develop a clear and standardised procedure for identifying needs at the school level.

- Build Competence and Confidence: Train teachers to follow this procedure effectively, building their competence and confidence.

- Assess Needs and Methods: The procedure should not only identify the needs but also evaluate why current provisions may not be working for a particular child, allowing practices to be adapted accordingly.

Key Message 2: Several Levels of Support to Teachers (Peer-Counselling, Multidisciplinary Teams)

STEPS:

- Reconceptualise Teacher Roles: Shift the role of teachers to be research-focused and enquiry-led practitioners.

- Integrate Research into Professional Learning: Ensure that the research component is a focus within the professional learning community, with principals maintaining this focus.

- Professional Autonomy: Grant teachers professional autonomy and trust, empowering them to make informed decisions.

Key Message 3: Awareness of Variety of Needs and Competence to Use the Tools

STEPS:

- Facilitate Collaboration: Allocate time and space for collaboration within the school and across the school network.

- Training on Data Use: Provide training to build competence in analysing and using data effectively.

- Comprehensive Information Sharing: Ensure teachers are informed about the child as a whole. Address GDPR concerns by finding ways to share necessary student information securely and legally.

2.3. School capacity to innovate and adapt

Resources

In terms of resources, Malta was noted for its advantage of having more teachers, allowing for parallel classes in Maltese and English. The importance of knowledge about available resources was emphasised. The discussions also touched on the economic system of municipalities, which plays a crucial role in resource allocation. Whether operating under a decentralised or centralised budget model, municipalities are responsible for their schools and the establishment of inclusive education. This high decentralisation and autonomy mean that municipalities have significant control over educational resources and policies[7].

Learning communities and Knowledge hubs

The group considered vital the creation of learning communities for sharing resources and best practices from classrooms. They have an essential role to play in the sharing of good practices at both national and international levels. Indeed, knowledge hubs can facilitate this exchange, ensuring that innovative practices are widely disseminated.

Slovakia's support system for schools includes regional teacher support centres, where experienced teachers mentor others. Croatia's annual conferences with workshops where teachers present their practices were highlighted as effective. Portugal's and Slovakia's school training centres and resource centres serve as hubs for mentorship and experience sharing. The Czech Republic's regional and national projects also help spread innovation.

Example

Operational in Norway since 2013, DEMBRA aims to enhance democratic preparedness in schools and teacher education institutions, combating prejudices and promoting inclusion. The initiative, supported by the Norwegian Directorate of Education, involves comprehensive programs through six peace and human rights centres across Norway. It was noted that stakeholder engagement is crucial, as bottom-up initiatives avoid transitional periods and address needs effectively. The adaptability of DEMBRA to other countries, such as Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, was also mentioned.

Flexibility and innovative programmes

Flexibility and innovation in educational programs are essential for meeting students' diverse needs and fostering inclusive learning environments. Several successful initiatives highlight how flexibility in curriculum design and innovative programs can significantly enhance educational outcomes.

One notable example is Malta's approach to vocational education, where students can choose vocational courses based on their inclinations. This approach was appreciated for meeting students' diverse needs. The flexibility in class choices helps prevent students from being confined to rigid academic paths, allowing them to pursue education that aligns with their interests and strengths.

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[7] This was already highlighted in a seminar organised by the Working Group on the role of municipalities in supporting the implementation of inclusive education in practice. Available here : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYuWr8WwrAA

The implementation of innovative programs, which should be implemented early on to help students, is also essential. An example of this is the [Reading Recovery program](#) that was showcased during the PLA. This Reading Recovery program is an effective school-based literacy intervention for five- or six-year-olds who are the lowest attaining in reading and writing. It enables these pupils to catch up with their classroom peers and reach age-expected levels within 20 weeks.

Therefore, schools need to have the possibility to access and try these innovative programs. However, it is equally important to analyse the costs associated with such programs to ensure they do not strain the school budget or interfere with other potentially less expensive alternatives. Balancing cost-effectiveness with the benefits of innovative programs is crucial for sustainable and inclusive educational development.

Example

The [VIBUS initiative](#) in Denmark serves as an exemplary model for how specialised centres can explore and implement best practices to support children and young people with special needs. Established in 2023, VIBUS aims to strengthen inclusive learning environments, provide special educational support, and enhance special education services. Its primary goal is to ensure that children and young people with special needs receive the support they require across various settings, including day care, primary schools, special education services, and specially arranged upper secondary school classes.

VIBUS is designed to bridge the gap between existing knowledge and practical implementation by ensuring that new and current educational insights reach municipalities, schools, and daycare centers effectively. This initiative also underscores the importance of early detection and intervention, promoting the involvement of families in the educational process to foster a sense of belonging and support.

Key messages on developing school capacity to innovate and adapt

Key Message 1: Effective Knowledge-Exchange and Resource Pooling System (Hub, School Network, Cluster)

STEPS:

- Transition to Learning Networks: Move away from topic-focused networks to networks that learn together, supporting holistic school development.

- Incentivise University Collaboration: Encourage universities to collaborate with school hubs to enhance resource pooling and knowledge exchange.

- Critical Friends: Utilise mentors, inspectors, and other critical friends to accompany and support schools in their development.

- Policy-Maker Role: Policy-makers should steer and mobilise stakeholders towards common goals, ensuring alignment and shared purpose.

Key Message 2: Effective and Needs-Based Training and Support and Professional Learning Network (Within and Outside School)

STEPS:

- Flexibility and encouragement for school staff to incorporate continuous professional development in their work schedules.

- Monitoring of the quality and relevance of CPD offer.

Key Message 3: Inclusion of All Relevant Stakeholders (Including Learner Voices)

STEPS:

- Regular Online Meetings: Organise online meetings between the Ministry, agencies, and students from different schools on a monthly basis, as practiced in Portugal.

- Empower Student Councils: Empower and actively involve student councils in decision-making processes.

- Youth Parliaments: Establish youth parliaments to give students a platform for their voices.

- Inclusive Representation: Address the challenge that not all students are represented in these structures by making teachers more receptive to the voices of all students. Solutions should be implemented at the school level.

- Engage School Community: Create structures at the school level to engage and mobilise all members of the school community, ensuring inclusive participation.

Key Message 4: Facilitate Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

STEPS:

- Inter-ministerial working groups and coordination mechanisms are encouraged.

2.4. Training and support for key education agents

ITE and CPD

As the peer learning activity was taking place on the [Institute of Education](#)'s premises, their unique position of operating independently from higher education was emphasised. It was praised for being able to touch upon the real problem that the teachers are facing, as they have a direct connection with them. Indeed, the IFE in Malta, established nine years ago, was created to develop different pathways for becoming a teacher, not just through university. The government employs teachers who may not meet traditional requirements, and the IFE provides the necessary education to regularise them.

This specific position offers several advantages and allows for innovation in ITE and CPD, leading to better educational outcomes. These advantages include:

- The IFE's modular approach allows for tailored educational pathways, accommodating diverse needs and schedules.

- Instead of traditional examinations, the IFE focuses on continuous assessments with extensive feedback, utilising self-reflection tools that enable teachers to choose areas they are most interested in learning about

Moreover, as it was highlighted, this system allows IFE to attract people who might not have had the opportunity to follow a "normal" curriculum. The IFE, therefore, can function as a second-chance institute, offering classes for individuals who otherwise wouldn't be able to study at other institutions. In Portugal, similar teaching qualifications allow individuals with a bachelor's degree to do CPD and start teaching.

However, it was raised that in this context, there could be concerns about maintaining quality assurance to ensure standards do not decline while addressing immediate needs, as lowering standards could reduce the attractiveness of the teaching profession.

The PLA participants also highlighted the importance of modular approaches and the need to invest in strengthening the social and emotional skills of teachers (risk of dis-alignment: some teachers who have not CPD on inclusion may not adhere to inclusive ethos). At the policy level (and school leader) to raise awareness of importance of CPD and the role of each school staff member as "an inclusion agent". Designing a national plan for CPD could come together with the explicit planning of time and conditions for CPD embedded in teacher and school leaders' schedules.

Link with Academia

During the PLA, it was highlighted how essential the integration of research, practice, and policy is to developing effective teacher training programs (see the triangle from the ATEE presentation). Ensuring that teacher education is informed by the research sector while being responsive to the practical needs of educators has the power to significantly enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Networking among ministries, education agencies, and universities is essential to foster a collaborative approach that avoids the general pitfalls linked to a top-down approach.
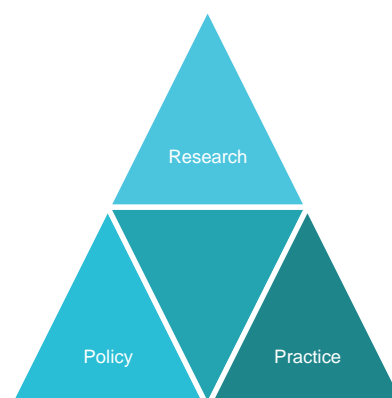
Core competences and values as part of the teacher's curriculum

During the PLA, it was underlined the importance of incorporating core competences and values such as equity, inclusion, and fairness into the teacher training curriculum. This is essential for developing well-rounded, effective educators. This approach ensures that teachers are not only equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge but also embody the values that promote a positive and inclusive learning environment for all students.

Again, the IFE exemplifies best practices in this area by offering a progressive education model that includes special courses and developed modules. During school visits, various training programs for teachers, such as those addressing cyberbullying and autism, were particularly noteworthy. These programs reflect the commitment to preparing teachers to handle diverse classroom challenges effectively.

The Teacher Professional Learning for Inclusion (TPL4I)

EASNIE's project, running from 2018 to mid-2022, aimed to prepare all teachers to support diverse learners and achieve inclusive education. Key tools developed include the Policy Self-Review Tool and the Profile for Inclusive Teacher Professional Learning, which provides frameworks for evaluating and enhancing TPL policies. The project covered the full continuum of teacher-professional learning, addressing the needs of all education professionals and learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Emphasising values like equity, inclusion, and fairness, TPL4I integrated critical thinking and practical tasks into training, aligning with OECD core competences such as growth mindset and global competence.
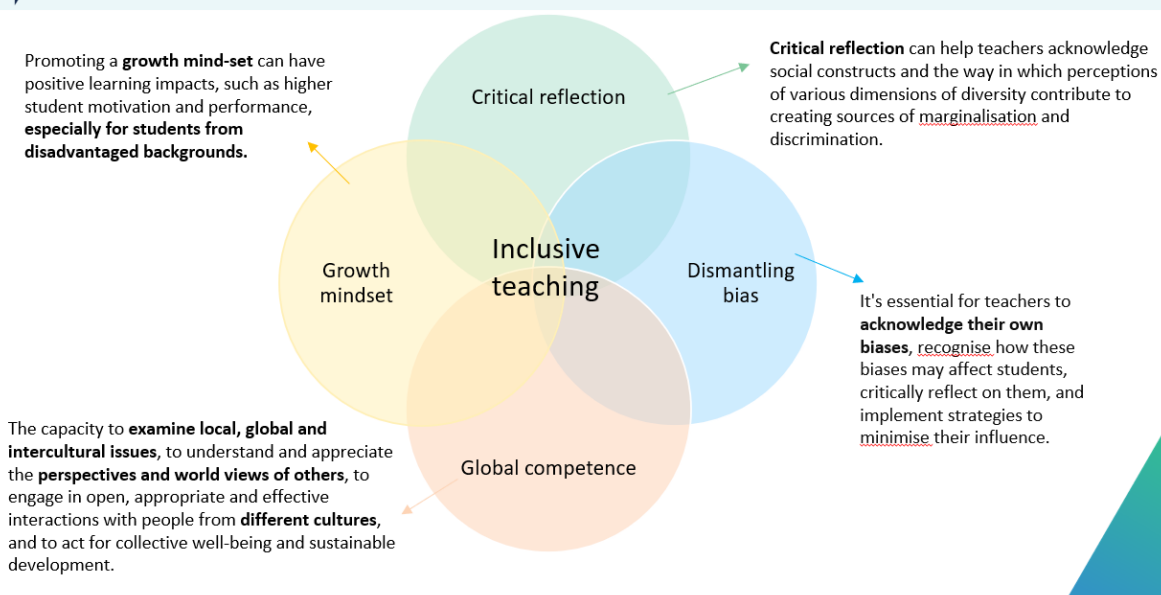
The OECD has identified several core competences for teachers that should be integral to their training: growth mindset, critical reflection, dismantling bias and global competences.


Source: OECD's presentation

Supporting teachers

Supporting teachers is essential for fostering an inclusive and high-quality education system. In this context, it was underlined that ensuring teachers' professional growth through mentoring and training practices is essential. The IFE provides a valuable example of integrating mentoring into training practices, including the use of co-tutors in classrooms. This approach helps teachers develop their skills in a supportive environment. Additional strategies such as job-shadowing, creating communities of practice, peer learning, and peer support are also suggested as valuable methods to enhance professional growth.
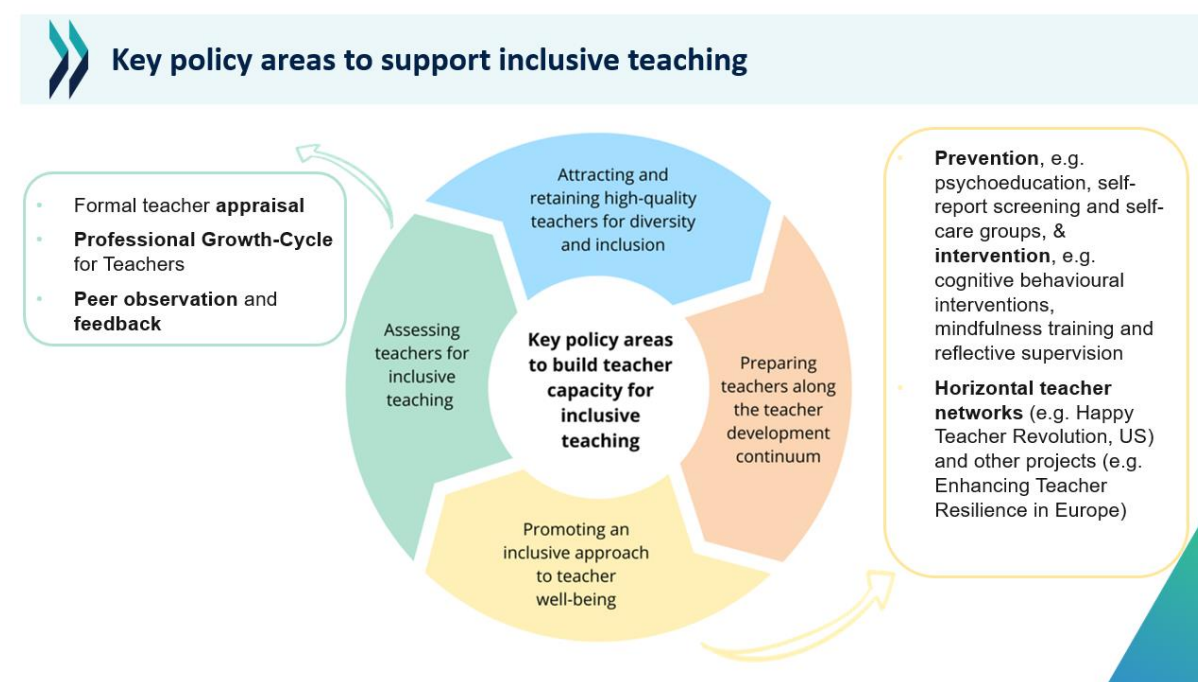
Source: OECD's presentation

Creating an ecosystem of support around learner is crucial. This approach ensures that the burden of meeting diverse educational needs does not fall on a single teacher but is shared across a supportive network. For example, in France, resource teachers in each academy train other teachers on inclusive education and provide specialised training. In Croatia, teaching assistants are appointed to support students without taking on teaching roles. Additionally, an educational expert for inclusion works with a large number of students, conducting workshops with teachers, students, speech therapists, and psychologists.
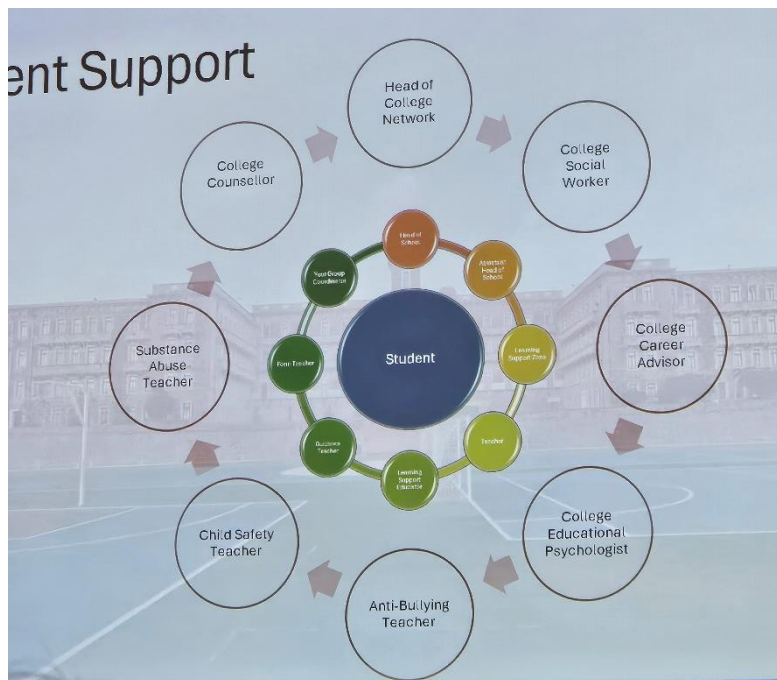
The secondary school in Malta provides an exemplary model of a double ecosystem of support for students. This system comprises two interconnected levels of support designed to ensure comprehensive assistance for students.

The first ecosystem, located within the school, directly supports the student and includes various roles such as: Teachers, Guidance Teachers, Learning Support Educators, Year Group Coordinators, Head of School, etc. This internal support network is focused on addressing the day-to-day academic and emotional needs of the students, ensuring they receive personalised attention and guidance. The second ecosystem extends beyond the individual school and includes support from the college (grouping of schools), encompassing roles such as: College Social Workers, College Career Advisors, College Educational Psychologists, Substance Abuse Teachers, Child Safety Teachers, Anti-Bullying Teachers, College Counselors and Head of College Network. This external layer provides additional resources and expertise to support the school's efforts. It ensures that schools have access to specialised services and advice, enhancing their capacity to address a wider range of student needs effectively. Together, these two ecosystems create a robust support structure that not only focuses on the individual student's growth and well-being but also reinforces the school's overall ability to provide high-quality education and support.

Example

Italy's recent **reform in student career guidance** expands the concept of inclusion beyond just special needs. It focuses on all learners, enhancing individual talents and potential. Career guidance is now viewed as an educational process that equips students with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate life independently and responsibly. A learner-centred approach is essential for guidance success, which directly contributes to reducing early school leaving and learning gaps. Guidance activities should be embedded in teaching processes from pre-school onwards. These activities should encourage students' active participation in understanding themselves and planning their life paths, while also promoting equal opportunities and challenging stereotypes.

Key messages on training and support for key education agents

Key Message 1: Flexible and Adaptable Specialized Training and Support for Schools

STEPS:

- School Flexibility: Allow schools the flexibility to assess what is important to them, similar to the BEfr Steering plans, to tailor their training and support needs.

Key Message 2: Awareness of Resources Available and Easy Access to These

STEPS:

- Resource Bag: Provide a comprehensive bag of resources with concrete examples on how to personalize education for the diversity of learners in the classroom.

- Optimized School Hubs: Optimize the system of school hubs and clusters to ensure an effective flow of communication between different layers of the education system.

- GDPR Discussion: Engage in discussions on GDPR to ensure that the information flow is both transparent and sensitive.

- Learning Communities: Establish learning communities at different levels (school heads, teachers, etc.) to share tips and good practices. For example, in HR, a national platform was created where teachers can share their learning materials, a result born from a project initiative.

Key Message 3: Empowering Schools to Mainstream Formative Assessment

STEPS:

- Provide teachers with tools and guidelines on formative assessment through projects like MAIA, to empower them to integrate formative assessment into their teaching practices.

Key Message 4: Transparency and Flexibility in Sharing Data and Building Competence in Analysing and Using This Data

ANNEX 1. AGENDA

DAY 1 (15 May)

8:30 - 9:00	*WELCOME COFFEE*
09:00 – 09:20	**Opening session: welcome (MT authorities)**
9:20 – 9:35	**Introduction (EC)** • Working Group context: what are we working towards? • Getting to know each other/participants' expectations
09:35 – 09:55	**Introduction to the PLA question** • Presentation by WG consultant • Examining our key questions and objectives
09:55-10:00	**Introduction to the PLA method and agenda**
10:00 – 10:30	**Case study: building capacity for targeted support in Malta** • discussion and feedback
10:30 – 10:45	*Coffee break*
10:45 – 13:00	**Country workshops - session #1** in parallel workshops (3 sub-groups with 2 country presentations each) *For details, see below and the PLA Guide*
13:00-14:00	*Lunch at the venue*
14:00 – 14:30	**Plenary session: feedback from country workshops, emerging issues**
14:30 – 15:15	**Plenary session 1**: • Between special needs and inclusive education. The perspective from the Italian Teacher Education Programmes - *Davide Parmigiani (ATEE)* • The IFE stance on the politics of schooling - *Oswald Tanti Rigos (IFE)* • How this stance influences the development and delivery of its courses in practical terms - *Michelle Panzavecchia (IFE)* • Q&A and discussion
15:15 - 15:35	*Coffee break*
15:35 – 16:40	**Plenary session 2:** • OECD's project Building capacity for inclusive teaching - *Lucie Cerna (OECD)* • EASNIE's resources for capacity building for inclusion - *Gareth Hughes (EASNIE)* • Q&A and group work
16:40 – 17:30	**Reflection on the day: what general conclusions can be learnt from the approaches seen today?** • Sharing, reflection, and discussion

17:30-18:00	*Meeting of the Steering Group*
evening	*Dinner – arranged at participants' own time and expenses'*

DAY 2 (16 May)

8:30	*MEET AT IFE AND TRANSFER TO SCHOOL*
9:00 – 13:00	**School Visits** • San Gwann Primary School (*welcome coffee)* • Pembroke Secondary School
13:00 – 14:15	*Lunch at Pembroke Secondary School* *Transfer to IFE*
14:15 – 16:30	**Country workshops – session #2** parallel workshops (3 sub-groups with 2 country presentations each) *For details, see below and the PLA Guide*
16:30 -16:45	*Coffee break*
16:45-17:15	**Plenary session: feedback from country workshops, emerging issues**
17:15-17:30	**Reflection on the day** • Short feedback on the day • Instructions for country poster task
17:30- 18:00	*End of meeting day – meeting of the Steering Group. Country delegations reflect on their posters*
18:15	*Valletta tour and social dinner*

DAY 3 (17 May)

09:00 – 9:15	**INTRODUCTION – OBJECTIVES OF THE DAY**
9:15 – 9:30	**Plenary: feedback on the Malta case study**
9:30 – 10:15	**Country conclusions** Finalisation of posters in country pairs, presentation to plenary
10:15 – 10.45	**Plenary: work on key messages and recommendations**
10:45 – 11:15	*Coffee Break*
11:15 – 12:40	**Plenary: work on key messages and recommendations** (continuation and end)
12:40 – 13:00	**Evaluation of the PLA, next steps and conclusions of the PLA**
13:00 – 14:00	*Lunch at the venue and good-bye*

ANNEX 2. LIST OF COUNTRY WORKSHOPS

Country	Focus of the presentation (TBD)
Austria	Peer Learning Activity – Building school leaders' and teachers' capacity as key agents of inclusion
Czech Republic	National policies and guidelines for inclusive education
French Community of Belgium	The « Pact for Excellence in Teaching»
Denmark	Inclusive education in Denmark
France	National reforms on teacher training, improved accessibility and improved access
Hungary	Targeted measures for inclusion in Hungary
Italy	Catering for the needs of each and all learners through guidance
Norway	Inclusive education in Norway
Portugal	Targeted support: identifying groups at risk of exclusion and providing adequate support – challenges and opportunities
Slovakia	Curriculum reform and regional teachers support centres
Slovenia	Support schools in their journey towards more inclusive education for all
Spain	LOMLOE and Territorial cooperation program for inclusive education

ANNEX 3. MALTESE CONTEXT AND SUMMARY OF SCHOOL VISITS

Maltese context

Malta's educational system has made significant progress in recent years, with notable improvements in reducing early school leaving. Despite these advances, challenges persist, particularly in addressing underachievement among 15-year-olds and increasing tertiary education attainment. The government has introduced various reforms to tackle these issues, including vocational education programs and enhanced psychosocial services. Curriculum reforms emphasise competence-based learning, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and digital skills.

Figure 1: Key indicators overview

			Malta		EU	
			2011	2021	2011	2021
EU-level-targets		**2030 target**				
Participation in early childhood education (from age 3 to starting age of compulsory primary education)		≥ 96%	99.4%[13]	89.1%[20]	91.8%[13]	93.0%[20]
Low achieving eighth-graders in digital skills		< 15%	:	:	:	:
Low achieving 15-year-olds in:	Reading	< 15%	36.3%[09]	35.9%[18]	19.7%[09]	22.5%[18]
	Maths	< 15%	33.7%[09]	30.2%[18]	22.7%[09]	22.9%[18]
	Science	< 15%	32.5%[09]	33.5%[18]	18.2%[09]	22.3%[18]
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)		< 9%	18.8%[b]	10.7%[b]	13.2%	9.7%[b]
Exposure of VET graduates to work-based learning		≥ 60% (2025)	:	48.3%	:	60.7%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 25-34)		≥ 45%	26.2%[b]	42.5%[b]	33.0%	41.2%
Participation of adults in learning (age 25-64)		≥ 47% (2025)	:	:	:	:

Source: 'Education and Training Monitor 2022', Europa.eu, 2022. https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/en/country-reports/malta.html

Professional development for teachers is a crucial focus. While recent salary increases have made the teaching profession more attractive, participation in CPD remains voluntary and not required for

career progression. To address this, the government plans to introduce targeted funding for schools with disadvantaged students and improve the CPD framework. These efforts aim to support teachers better and enhance educational outcomes for all students in Malta[8].

To understand better the Maltese context, the working group members participated in school visits, as detailed below.

San Gwann Primary School

The Working Group visit to San Gwann Primary School began with a welcome coffee session where the members were greeted by the Head of the College, which oversees a group of schools in Malta, and the Head of the School. The working group visited various facilities, starting with the sports fields. The importance of daily physical activity was emphasised. They recently launched a new program promoting fitness through play, not bound by a strict curriculum. This program involves 30 minutes of play three times a week and is currently being piloted in 25 schools.

The group also explored the VR classes and the Reading Recovery program. The Reading Recovery initiative, based on a model from UCL, provides daily 20-minute sessions for students falling behind in reading. This program boasts an 80% success rate, though it is costly and the school needs funding from the Maltese government.

The school visit ended with a multicultural fair where students and parents shared the food from their country of origin. The experience showcased the active parental involvement.

Pembroke Secondary School

The working group was welcomed by the Head of Pembroke Secondary School. The WG members learned that the school accommodates 959 students from 59 different nationalities and offers 52 classes with 32 different course options.

Support for students is provided at both the school and college levels. For example, new entrants benefit from an induction hub, and teachers receive CPD on various subjects, including multiculturalism.

During the visit, the WG members toured several facilities, including design and technology classrooms and design courses.

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[8] : 'Education and Training Monitor 2022', Europa.eu, 2022. https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2022/en/country-reports/malta.html