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EUNEC statements on 'Making Education more Inclusive'

These statements are based on the lessons learnt during the seminar on 'Making education more inclusive' in Bucharest, May 2017. They identify key issues for further debate within EUNEC and within each education council, member of the network.

EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively to the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant DG's. EUNEC also wants to promote action by its members at national/regional level. These statements can contribute to the national advisory opinions of education councils. They should lead to reflection and action by relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training, such as providers of education, teacher trade unions, social partners, students, parents and experts in the field of education and training.

The concept of inclusive education

An evolving concept

There has been a clear evolution in the policy concepts during the last 50 years. This evolution is the result of a radical change in the way we look at the place of people with disabilities in society.

During the 1970s, awareness was raised that disabled people were entitled to education and development. Before this stage, learning and developmental disorders were not explicitly labelled. They were often seen by teachers as a personal failure of the pupil. Disabled people were not seen as learners with specific and general development needs. They were –in the best case- an object to take care of but they were not considered as individuals with an own identity. They were not entitled of making their own choices.

During the last quarter of the last century, however, an explicit pedagogical vision came about dealing with children with disabilities. The development of orthopedagogy as a science supported these developments. There was a strong diagnostic practice that tried to describe and identify learning and developmental problems. As a result, in the 1970s and 80s, a network of specialized institutions provided education for pupils with disabilities. This was frequently based on a broad attestation, diagnostic and labeling of the pupils. Education for pupils with disabilities was categorical and segregated.

The UNESCO Salamanca statement (1994)¹ has lead, among other things, to a change in this way of thinking. The Salamanca statement was the outcome of the World Conference on Special Needs Education, and called for inclusion to be the norm. The same vision was

¹ UNESCO (1994). Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.



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also expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including education² (2006). Both statements are based on a non-discrimination principle as expressed in human rights treaties. They assume the right of people with disabilities on inclusion in the 'regular' society. They are based on a new vision that sees disability as an inadequate alignment between the characteristics of a person and the environment (including the school structure).

The most recent evolution is the emergence of a link between education for pupils with special needs and the attention to diversity in education. This interference remains one of the main questions in the debate: is it necessary that pupils with disabilities get a specific approach in education, or does a broad view on diversity in education offer enough guarantees?

Inclusion in education is a legal commitment

Inclusive education is not just about a moral imperative, it is a fundamental human right. It is not an optional extra, not a matter of good will. It is about a commitment governments have made towards obeying to international legal frameworks.

The **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (CRPD) has been adopted by the United Nations in 2006. The Convention marks a paradigm shift in attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are not viewed as 'objects' of charity, medical treatment and social protection; rather as 'subjects' with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.

Article 24 of this Convention asserts the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education without discrimination and on an equal basis with others.

Article 24 of the CRPD states that States must ensure for persons with disabilities:

- the right to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity;
- an inclusive education system at all levels;
- provision of reasonable accommodation, and individualised support measures; this means that the system has to provide accommodation and support allowing every person to enter the system, not regarding his/her disability. This support has to be tailored to the individual;
- opportunities to acquire skills to ensure equal participation in education and community; this is not about just access anymore;
- access to teachers qualified with appropriate skills; teachers are essential actors of change and have to be included in the decision making process;
- progressive realisation, recognising that rights are influenced by the availability of resources. There has to be a forward movement though.

² United Nations (2006), The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



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Clarification of concepts

In 2015, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities took the decision to elaborate a **General Comment on Article 24**, in order to clarify. This General Comment has been adopted in August 2016. The most important achievement is that it details and defines what an inclusive education system should look like.

The General Comment puts forward as a guiding principle, the following core features for inclusive education:

- a whole systems approach;
- a whole educational environment;
- a whole person approach;
- supported teachers;
- respect for diversity;
- learning friendly environments;
- effective transitions;
- building partnerships;
- ongoing monitoring.

The General Comment provides the framework and guidance for States. Now is the time to invest in making the right a reality.

Recommendations

Despite the progress achieved, despite the legal basis, profound challenges persist. Many millions of persons with disabilities continue to be denied the right to education, and for many education is available only in settings where persons with disabilities are isolated from their peers.

Need for creating the conditions

Inclusion expresses a commitment to educate all students, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom in the community where all the students attend school. Inclusion brings the support services to the child, rather than moving the child to the services. The student is always in the general education environment, and removed only when appropriate services cannot be provided in the general education classroom.

However, the values of inclusive education remain too often at the level of legal statements, without creating the conditions for their practical realization.

On the road to inclusive education, alternative means and tools of teaching and learning need to be explored, including the use of assistive technology and of more cooperative practices in schools. Tools such as sharing practices, working in team, differentiation and individualization will have to become part of the school culture and practice.



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Inclusive education calls for curriculum transformation, with room for flexibility and adaptation. Assessment of pupils with disabilities is another challenge. Assessment is needed, but only if valuing progress and connected to an individual approach.

Need for empowering schools, school heads and teachers

There is consensus on the centrality of the school in the process of construction of responses to special educational needs. Governments should empower the schools to develop a vision, make a plan, put it into practice. Policy should stay away from pedagogy and leave it to the schools. This also means that schools will be held accountable for the broad spectrum of learning, not only for the narrow test-driven results.

Barriers for inclusive education are often in the teacher, who is not enough prepared and not enough supported to deal with diversity in the classroom. The system cannot expect a teacher who has never seen a child with a disability, to teach children with a disability. It is not enough to know 'about' inclusive education, teachers should know how to intervene.

All teachers need training at all levels of education, pre- as well as in-service, including dedicated modules and experiential learning. Content of training can be modules on the conception and implementation of strategies, methodologies and curriculum development tools in order to accommodate and effectively include all students. The focus can be on human diversity and human rights, inclusive pedagogy, forms of communication and adapting teaching methods, provision of individualized instruction. Teachers need continuous support, which can be made possible through partnerships between schools, team teaching, joint teacher assessment, engagement of parents and links with local communities. Teachers often lack skills such as communication, decision making, flexibility, time management, self-direction, curiosity, problem solving, ability to work under pressure. Professional development programmes need to incentivize school heads and teachers to develop these additional skills.

There are a lot of great support teachers that are 'borrowed' to the school, but it is crucial to have the knowledge on inclusive education IN the school. The mainstream teacher has to remain at the centre of the process. Every child should be able to have special education in the classroom, and every teacher should know how to deal with it. Involving therapists with medical background also offers precious support, but it is important to keep in mind that the goal of education is not to cure, but to improve the learning process of all children.

Need for real involvement of parents and pupils

On the road to inclusive education, it is crucial to invest in real involvement of parents, families, pupils. It is not sufficient just to inform the parents and the pupils, they have to be taken on board as real partners. Effective and accountable parent-school collaborations have to be set up. Parents and families are now often just recipients of information, and not really part of the process of building the support right from the beginning.



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Need for an integrated approach

The governments of States committed to Article 24. Inclusive education is thus not only the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, but a comprehensive commitment across the government (health, labour, social protection, finances, ...). The other way around, the Ministry of Education is responsible for all children, whilst sometimes now children with disabilities are nowhere in the Ministry of Education, but under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare, or Family Affairs.

An integrated approach is thus needed. Different policies, different sectors have to coordinate actions, so that they can present an integrated offer to the child and the family, whilst nowadays, often, the child and the family are running after the services.

Need for research

Research needs to be conducted in order to investigate the benefits of inclusive education. When learning together, pupils acquire knowledge on multiple societal variety and learn to act within it. Pupils acquire motivation for mutual assistance and volunteering. Inclusive education can also be valued as a driver for pupil partnership. Cooperation between pupils enriches social and educational interaction with empathy and trust. Cooperation culture develops, new cooperation models are created in the education process.

There is need for data collection on special education programmes, services, initiatives and outcomes. Research needs to be conducted on how to implement inclusive education in order to guarantee maximum benefits, not only for students with disabilities or pupils at risk, but for all children, also those in situations of transitory needs. Emphasis on the criterion of 'permanence' may lead to leaving behind a group of pupils. By collecting data and conducting research, the system can focus on improving special education instruction and developing curricula and instruction that take into account students of different ages and varying needs. The system will also develop greater transparency, sharing of information, and comprehension of the implementation and ultimate success/failure of special education initiatives.

This research is not limited to research at university level; teachers should be educated to observe and to conduct research themselves, and to identify what is effective. Each school system could establish small research units (e.g. early childhood, primary, secondary form one unit) to conduct proactive investigations into best school-based practices.

Need for a change of minds

Inclusive education covers a lot more than just curriculum redesign and innovative educational practices, it's about values and beliefs. Inclusive education is related to valuing diversity.

The above mentioned challenges can be overcome. What is even more challenging, is the need for a change in the minds. The most important thing is to believe in inclusive



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education. Not every stakeholder in education is convinced of the benefits of inclusive education: parents hesitate, teachers are reluctant, policy makers don't make it a priority.

Every person's individuality and freedom to develop in equal conditions according to individual needs has to be recognized. Education needs to focus on the potential of each and every child. The child with disabilities has to be seen as a child first. All children are gifted in a way, education has to take the time to assess, to discover. School must allow each child to develop his or her full potential, whatever that potential might be.

This is not yet the case in a society or an education system that values knowledge and academic outcomes more than social interaction. The worthiness of education is linked often to academic results. Social and pedagogical interaction and its consequences do not come up as a value. Educational success should reflect all components of the mission of education, which consists in imparting knowledge, but also in fostering social development.

Schools must have the necessary resources to offer all the students a quality educational experience. However, merely adding resources will not be sufficient to stop the cycle of inequality. Implementing inclusive education will require working on the beliefs, values and preconceived notions behind long-standing practices.

The way forward: role of education councils

We are on the road to inclusive education. On that road, education councils can play an important role. Governments and policies change, but education councils, given their legal status, can offer stability and continuity.

Education councils are boundary workers, skilled in communication and policy analysis. They can lobby towards governments and point out their legal commitment to the implementation of inclusive education. They can also raise awareness among stakeholders, and disseminate customized supporting documents on inclusive education, in particular the General Comment.

As places of consultation and debate, they can offer a forum of interaction between educational stakeholders, stimulating mutual learning and conflict reduction. They can support partnerships that are crucial in the implementation of inclusive education.