

# Towards Inclusive Education and Beyond

EASPD 2021 Lisbon Declaration on Inclusive education



European Association of Service providers  
for Persons with Disabilities

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# 1

# Principles and Values

The:

- › United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 4 on Universal Design and Article 24 on Education and General Comment No.4 on Inclusive Education)
- › The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4)
- › Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (1994)
- › Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights), Article 2 Right to Education
- › European Social Charter (revised), Articles 15 and 17
- › Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (Area of Action 5.3)
- › EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021)
- › European Child Guarantee (2021)

all clearly state that all persons with disabilities (and their families) have the right to:

- › equal opportunities and high-quality appropriate education to maximize their potential, and to participate in and contribute fully to an inclusive society;
- › choose and receive education in an inclusive environment;
- › appropriate resources and expertise to meet their educational, social and health-related needs;
- › access to quality services.

# 2

# To Inclusive Education and BEYOND

The European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) is a European not-for-profit organisation representing over 20,000 social service provider organisations across Europe and disability. The main objective of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.

Through its Member Forum on Education, comprised of teachers, professors, school managers, representatives of networks of schools, as well as support services and other education providers for persons with disabilities, EASPD has been actively working on inclusive education for all.

Driven by the expertise and experience of its members, EASPD has developed first its 2012 Manifesto on Inclusive Learning<sup>1</sup> and followed by its 2015 Salzburg Declaration on Towards More Inclusive Learning Environments in Europe.<sup>2</sup> These documents have laid the foundation of EASPD's policy recommendations for inclusive education. In cooperation with its partners, EASPD has worked to promote the application of these recommendations. This work has included the implementation of a number of European projects to improve inclusive education systems across Europe and the delivery of several trainings on inclusive education. These 'Building An Inclusive School For All' (BAISFA) courses raise awareness and understanding of the concepts and principles of inclusive education, universal design for learning and reasonable accommodation amongst teachers and staff of education providers.

This Manifesto builds on the previous policy documents of EASPD; the findings of EASPD's 2020 Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries<sup>3</sup> and the contributions of the 'To Inclusive Education and BEYOND' conference participants, to provide a comprehensive overview of what is needed to realise high quality, inclusive education systems across Europe.



<sup>1</sup> EASPD, 2021, Manifesto on Inclusive Learning

<sup>2</sup> EASPD, 2021, Towards More Inclusive Learning Environments in Europe

<sup>3</sup> EASPD, 2021, 2020 Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries

# 3

# Adapting the system to the learner

Access to education is a fundamental human right, as enshrined in several international and European Human Rights documents. This right extends to all people, including those with disabilities, as re-affirmed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), which recognises the right to an inclusive education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity at all levels of education in the human life-course, including pre-school services, vocational education and lifelong learning.<sup>4</sup>

Inclusive education enables students to learn side by side to their peers in the same classroom, regardless of their differing background or support needs. In an inclusive education system, the framework changes to adapt to and welcome every learner, who is valued and able to contribute to the learning environment and all other areas of the school community, including artistic, cultural and sporting activities.

Inclusive education systems reflect and respect the diversity in society and accommodate all learners. To do this, inclusive education providers adapt the learning environment to the individual needs of the student and adopt attitudes, approaches and strategies that include all learners in all activities, with respect to their individual learning profile.

One billion people, or 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, the OECD states that almost one-fifth of students may develop a special educational need during their schooling years.<sup>6</sup> Disability or diagnosis should not define, by itself, these learners' educational path or even to define the accommodations put in place in an education setting. As outlined in the UNCRPD, learners should be offered a complete set of inclusive learning environments, including parallel settings and post-graduate opportunities, to avoid the pitfall of being altogether excluded from education because of an overly rigid and formal education system.

Inclusive education systems reflect and respect the diversity in society and accommodate all learners.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, 2006, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation, 2012, World report on disability 2011, WHO Press, Geneva, viewed 29 June 2021; [https://www.who.int/disabilities/world\\_report/2011/report.pdf](https://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2015, Education for All 2000-2015: achievements and challenges, EFA global monitoring report, 2015, 12th edn, UNESCO, Paris, viewed 28 Jun 2021, <http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2015/education-all-2000-2015-achievements-and-challenges>

# 4

## Barriers to Inclusive education

Despite education being a fundamental human right for all, data by the World Policy Analysis Center has found that of 193 United Nations Member States, only 34 guarantee the right to education for persons with disabilities or protect against discrimination on the basis of disability in education in their constitutions.<sup>7</sup> Across the world, persons with disabilities spend a lower average number of years in school than their counterparts without disabilities with persons without disabilities receiving, on average, seven years of schooling, while persons with disabilities only receive five years.<sup>8</sup>

Progress has been made to include learners with special educational in mainstream educational settings, but a number of common, fundamental barriers remain, which prevent the realisation of full inclusive education systems. These barriers may be found in all aspects of the school, as well as within communities, and in local and national policies. Barriers also arise in the interaction between students and what and how they are taught.

A key barrier, among others, is that school systems in most countries follow two prevailing systems: an inclusive mainstream and a segregated special school.

Rather than being a “twin track approach,” a strategy whereby individual needs of and support for children with disabilities are realised at the same time as eliminating environmental, economic barriers to education, this ‘Parallel Model,’ of supporting both mainstream and



special schools, fails to achieve real inclusion. Instead, the Parallel Model continues to fund special education alongside the funding of mainstream schools, creating a competition of resources and outcomes between mainstream schools, who are trying to become more inclusive, and special schools.

The impact of the continued prevalence of a segregated school system can be particularly significant as a learner moves upwards through the education system. For some children, a segregated school system can mean that after having been able to enjoy an inclusive education in a

7 United Nations, 2018, Disability and Development Report, New York, viewed 29 June 2021, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/10/UN-flagship-report-on-disability-and-development.pdf> p.76

8 United Nations, 2019, Disability and Development Report, New York, viewed 29 June 2021, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/10/UN-flagship-report-on-disability-and-development.pdf> p. 81

mainstream primary school, they are forced back into a special school for their secondary education. For others moving into the next level of their educating brings new challenges.

These systems persist because of the belief that a certain percentage of children, such as those with more severe forms of disabilities or higher support needs, cannot be included into the regular educational environments. This belief is influenced by the medical model, whereby disability is viewed as an impairment or difference which needs to be fixed. The prevalence of this mindset is further exacerbated by need to diagnose and label a learner's disability before considering the reasonable accommodations, or support measures that empower them to develop and learn to their fullest potential. This label should not be used to justify why the student is unable to learn and excuse the education system to find ways to better teach and involve students in their educational path. It is still a major challenge to find intelligent ways of categorisation of learners that allows access to additional support in mainstream educational settings without producing segregation and stigma. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health<sup>9</sup> can serve as an important tool to frame, describe, record and measure functioning and disability.

Education settings should only focus on pedagogical issues. One of the reasons there is a need of categorisation is because other systems (like health, fiscal and social security) rely on education services labelling to apply benefits, fiscal relief or support. This

create pressure on the education system to label and categorize students. This pressure can cause parents to feel additional pressure to over diagnose the disability of their child to receive higher benefits or support.

The physical accessibility of school infrastructure remains an issue and in some countries as the majority of mainstream school buildings do not comply with accessibility standards. In addition, assistive transport is often only provided to special schools and, although adaptive technology is available in most of the inclusive settings, very often the knowledge, competence and creativity to apply, adapt and use the technology is still lacking.

Overcoming these barriers doesn't require only legislative action, or raising available monetary assets, but above all a sustained and systemic modification of attitude and approach at all levels of society, including the education system.

Many stakeholders, including teachers, parents, school managers and local authorities, often hold misconceptions towards other stakeholders, other sectors (such as health) and inclusion. These misconceptions prevent stakeholders from working together to support the full inclusion of learners with disabilities in society.

Misconceptions towards each other can also reinforce the disconnection of stakeholders with care systems, planned interventions, medical treatment and the school system working independently and remaining unable to break traditional disciplinary boundaries. Moving beyond these silos is an important step to working co-productively, a key methodology for the long-term success of inclusive

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<sup>9</sup> ICF Education URL: <https://icfeducation.org/what-is-icf>





education. Through co-production all stakeholders are empowered through their continuous involvement in the design, development and delivery of the service, policy or activity. To enable stakeholders to adapt to the challenges that the transition to inclusive education may bring, all affected parties must be brought around the table, to work together constructively in teams that reach across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Parental involvement and parental concern for the education of their children is another key consideration in the move towards inclusion. It has been observed that parents often have concerns that their children will not receive the support that they require in a mainstream classroom. As a result, it is important that parents are included as key partners in the inclusion process, to ensure that they and their children are fully supported.

The current teacher training curricula and standards also pose a barrier to the realisation of inclusive education. Having a disability should not stop a student from learning and the training of teachers is often not oriented to the requirements of inclusive education, meaning that

teachers are left without the knowledge or tools to be able to support the needs of a diverse number of learners in their classroom.<sup>10</sup> This is an issue that the initial training of teachers often do not include compulsory modules on inclusive education, while teachers are also often not able to take additional teacher training on the topic later in their career. An additional challenge is the lack of support for the teachers in the classroom, which in turn hinders their ability to meet the needs of all of their students in the classroom.

The monitoring of the state inclusive education is a key element in achieving its realisation. The lack of data on individuals with disabilities is severely constraining the ability of the European and wider international community to monitor the situation of inclusive education. This lack of hard data is exacerbated by an absence of harmonised definitions of disability in the EU and internationally, such as through the resource-based approach and its tri-partite classification system (A/ Disabilities, B/ Difficulties, C/Disadvantages) agreed by OECD countries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> EASPD, 2021, 2020 Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries p.19

<sup>11</sup> OECD/European Communities (2009), Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages in the Baltic States, South Eastern Europe and Malta. Educational Policies and Indicators. p. 21

# 5

## The Impact of COVID-19

During the outbreak of COVID-19, a key measure implemented by governments across Europe has been the closure of schools, forcing students to temporarily continue their education from home. This has impacted the education for all students, in particular it has had a significant impact on the access students with disabilities had to education.

While some of the children and young people benefit from digital learning opportunities and home schooling, the experiences of others show that these very learning opportunities are not suitable for some children with special education needs (SEN) to be able to make developmental and learning progress.<sup>12</sup> In general, it is understood that the quality of education, and the availability and quality of support to children with disabilities and families were undermined.<sup>13</sup>

The ability of schools, to support and teach their learners remotely varied between schools and teachers. As teaching moved back into classrooms, many children with disabilities were the last to be included back in the classroom and some have been unable to return to school since the transition to distance learning.

As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures that accompany it, especially during the first period of lockdown, have caused a learning delay among students. This is a problematic trend for vulnerable students, including students with SEN and targeted efforts are required to ensure that these groups do not fall further behind as we recover from the pandemic.



<sup>12</sup> EASPD, 2021, 2020 Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries p.26

<sup>13</sup> EASPD, 2021, 2020 Barometer of Inclusive Education in Selected European Countries p.26

# 6

# The Digital Transformation

The increased uptake of technology and the rapid digitalisation of our societies has touched every aspect of life and our education system has been no exception. Schools are now required to prepare learners for life within digitalised societies, while also utilise the potential of technology to enhance their own teaching practices.

Alongside the use of mainstream technology, assistive technologies can also enable students with special needs to participate in education and to make inclusive education a reality. Common applications such as speech-to-text, text-to-speech, and auto-captioning can easily enable blind, visually impaired, deaf and hard-of-hearing students to participate in traditional educational settings and practices. Similarly, smart technologies can facilitate the diagnosis and remediation of some special needs (e.g. dysgraphia) and support the socio-emotional learning of students with autism so they can more easily participate in mainstream education.

Working with support service providers, learners and their families, schools and authorities have a responsibility to ensure that all pupils have access to the digital infrastructure and technology that they need to continue their education and develop alongside their peers.

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly accelerated the update of technology by schools and education providers. The uptake of online platforms and digital learning tools have been central actions that schools have implemented to teach their students remotely. Despite holding many opportunities, these online tools have also posed challenges to those who have little prior experience or knowledge in using them. Some of these technologies have also proved themselves to not be fully accessible to all learners, creating additional barriers to the inclusion of all learners in the classroom. While many schools have adapted quickly, in order to provide learners, including those with disabilities, with access to learning opportunities from a distance, other schools have fallen behind, putting the education and inclusion of learners at risk.

To be able to make the most of the opportunities of technology and digitalisation, schools, teachers, service providers, learners and their families must be provided with the appropriate training and support to be able to use these technologies. Furthermore, all students and their families, schools and services must have access to the infrastructure required to use these technologies, to ensure that a digital divide and further inequality of access is not created.

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# 7

# Education as part of a life in the community

Schools form an integral component of any community and in an inclusive system they must develop an understanding of their role as a cooperative community institution for the promotion of lifelong inclusion. Conceptually, this means schools must reflect and welcome their wider community, as well as collaborate with other community services from the youth welfare, social and health care or cultural sector.

Learning and community participation is for life and should be viewed as such throughout the lifecycle of the individual. Key points of transition, including pre-school to primary school; primary school to secondary school and secondary school into employment or higher education are often moments at which learners face additional challenges and risk exclusion from the education system. Schools must work with other

community actors, support services and education providers to ensure that learners with disabilities do not fall through the gaps created in these moments of transition.

However, schools cannot bring upon themselves solving all of the challenges that prevent persons with disabilities from being included in the community. School is just one actor in bringing inclusive values into society. Their role in this is a pedagogical one. Schools should not compensate the weaknesses of other systems failures in providing the support needed. Ultimately, other community actors also have to facilitate the inclusion of persons with disabilities or learners will leave school and will face the reality of engaging in a society that is not prepared to accommodate individual needs of its citizens with a disability.



# 8

# Role of the European Institutions

EASPD is aware that education is a competence of European Union (EU) Member States and so the EU institutions and the Council of Europe have a supporting competence in this field. Despite this, the EU can still play an important role in supporting the development of inclusive education systems and has declared its commitment to creating more inclusive education systems via the European Education Area, the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Child Guarantee.

Alongside these commitments the EU has a number of tools at its disposal to support Member States to transition towards inclusive education systems. These tools include the European Semester, the EU Budget and Open Method of Coordination, which can be used to monitor the state of inclusive education, provide funding opportunities for inclusion and support Member States to exchange proposing practices and the latest innovations in the field. In addition to providing support to Member States, the EU should lead by example, as recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and ensure the inclusivity of European Schools.

## Recommendations to EU Policy Makers

- ▶ Promote a clear and coherent policy framework and legislation for inclusive education, in co-operation with Member States.
- ▶ Ensure the Disability Platform specifically includes a focus on inclusive education.
- ▶ Enable the comprehensive collection of data for access to inclusive education, including Early Childhood Education and Care and lifelong learning, across a number of target groups, including learners with disabilities through the incorporation of additional data collection mechanism within the European Semester process.
- ▶ Lead the way for inclusive education and de-segregate current and future European Schools and include all learners in their classrooms.
- ▶ Promote a harmonised definition of disability in Europe based on the UN CRPD.
- ▶ Promote the recommendations of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.
- ▶ Contribute to the achievement of inclusive education systems via EU Funding Programmes including Erasmus+, ESF+ and InvestEU.

# 9

# Role of National and Local authorities

At the level of the Member States, despite their commitment to promote inclusive education, too many learners with special needs are still – sometimes increasingly so – placed in segregated institutions or in mainstream settings with inadequate support.<sup>14</sup>

It is above all at the local, at the community level that the changes are the most important to develop a sustainable inclusive educational system. Special education settings and the competence developed by disability organisations will increasingly become a source of expertise available to the wider education and community services.

## Recommendations for National and Regional Policy Makers

- › Shift from institutionalised structures towards needs-based inclusive systems across the lifespan of the individual. This should include the creation of policies and reforms in the field of early childhood intervention, to prevent institutionalisation.
- › Promote the implementation of universal design in all learning environments.
- › Redefine school achievements and assessment methods for a more flexible system, that recognises the individual talents of students.
- › Support the transition of students with special educational needs to the labour market.
- › Support the post-secondary sector, such as universities and vocational education and training, as inclusive places to live and learn.
- › Gather reliable data on the incidence, effectiveness and comparative costs of inclusive and segregated education.
- › Use the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health to frame, describe, record and measure functioning and disability.
- › Reform and develop the teacher education system to enable future teachers and school staff to meet the demands of an inclusive school system.
- › Implement awareness raising campaigns to highlight the capabilities and needs of persons with disabilities for education providers, and the general public.
- › Ensure that education and support providers, learners and parents can fully access and know how to use technology hardware and digital infrastructure needed for communication and education.

<sup>14</sup> NESSE network of experts and European Commission (2012), Education and Disability/Special Needs — policies and practices in education, training and employment for students with disabilities and special educational needs in the EU.  
URL: <http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports/activities/reports/disability-special-needs-1>

# 10

# Role of Education Professionals

Those on the frontline of the learning environments are and will remain education provider staff, such as teachers, counsellors, assistants and headmasters.

For all learners to be fully included in the education system, it is paramount to have adequate teacher and school staff education and training to ensure the staff has the knowledge, skills and attitude to deal with diversity and inclusion. Teachers, educators and trainers need

to be aware of the diversity in their classroom and the challenge and opportunities that it can offer. The opinions about inclusion are very often diverse and a sometimes related to fear: fear of change, fear of the unknown, and so on. Understanding the framework of 'Universal Design' and the benefits it offers is a process, and from the point of view of the daily work of the teacher, it offers a very attainable way of teaching.

## Recommendations for Education Professionals

- › Strengthen the awareness of local community actors about the importance of inclusive teaching.
- › Establish a clear vision on inclusive education and make sure it is shared by all levels of staff.
- › Share the knowledge and expertise of special education providers with mainstream providers through partnerships and common understandings.
- › Build a network with potential employers to facilitate the transition to the labour market.
- › Invest in adequate education and training for all teachers and staff to ensure the understanding of inclusive education and special educational needs as well as how to use technology.
- › Implement Universal Design in all learning environments, e.g. the infrastructure, curricula and technology.
- › Share promising practices which promote the full participation of learners with disabilities in sporting and artistic educational opportunities.

## Recommendations for Teachers, Trainers and Staff

- › Collaborate with the family and the community of the child.
- › Encourage the collaboration of children and peer learning amongst learners.
- › Implement Universal Design in all learning environments.
- › Transfer good practices among teachers, educators and other training professionals.
- › Adapt evaluation methods for a more flexible system, that recognises the individual talents of students.
- › Utilise open platform applications, which can be created with and by other teachers, as a resource for the use of technology in schools.
- › Consider physical education, sports and artistic activities also as a key component of inclusive education to promote the development of soft skills.

# 11

# Role of Support Service Providers

Support Service providers in the field of education provide essential long and short-term services which empower pupils with fewer opportunities or support need and their families, to fully and successfully participate in the life of the local community in which they reside and education environment.<sup>15</sup> These services must work with all stakeholders in the community to support the transition of pupils with disabilities into mainstream schools. In particular, service providers must work to increase the capabilities of the teachers and the school environment and provide additional support to school staff.

## Recommendations for Support Service Providers

- › Work with schools, families and other stakeholders to provide community-based support to learners with disabilities.
- › Work closely with families, teachers, trainers and students to enable them to utilise the opportunities of technology.
- › Cooperate with other stakeholders to support learners at key points of transition.
- › Facilitate the collaboration of families, teachers and learners to co-produce inclusive learning environments and education materials accessible to all students.
- › Create open resource centers and share your knowledge and expertise of special education providers with mainstream providers.
- › Work with special schools to open up to become mainstream schools.

## Commitments of EASPD

- › Collaborate with networks promoting social inclusion to present a stronger common position.
- › Contribute to an EU policy position on inclusive learning, consistent with the framework of the UNCRPD.
- › Provide information, models of good practices and support to member organisations.
- › Promote positive attitudes towards inclusion, diversity, partnership and network opportunities.
- › Organise and promote training for teachers, educators and other professionals on inclusive education.
- › Promote cooperation between its Member Fora, to support the promotion of inclusive learning throughout the lifecycle of individuals.

<sup>15</sup> BEYOND, 2021, Study on the role of service providers in the transition towards inclusive education, p.22



# 12

## Conclusion

Access to education and lifelong learning programmes in mainstream schools and other educational facilities is still far from being the reality for many pupils and learners with disabilities. This can depend on a persistent prejudice about the skills and potential of persons with disabilities; a shortage of qualified staff; a lack of appropriate accessible buildings; and a lack of resources/funding to support inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these issues and has highlighted the progress that still needs to be made to realise fully inclusive education systems at all levels across Europe.

Our education systems should be viewed holistically, as part of the wider community, working with local stakeholders to create and promote more inclusive societies throughout the lifecycle of individuals. These systems should embrace the diversity of our societies and promote the appreciation of individuals based on their unique skills and talents. As we look to rebuild our societies after the COVID-19 pandemic, schools should stand at the heart of the recovery, equipping learners with knowledge and skills to contribute and participate in their communities during the digital and green transitions.

Despite these challenges, EASPD and its members are convinced that the goal of inclusive education is real and achievable. A strong leadership from Member States and EU institutions must provide the legislative framework to encourage local and community actors to shift their attitude and approach towards inclusion. Initiatives should comprise 1) a shift of economic support from segregated to mainstream education providers; 2) teacher and staff training to raise awareness and understanding of the concepts and advantages of inclusive education and universal design; and 3) a reform of the education system based on more flexible curricula leading to more flexible certifications adapted to the needs of each individual.

As we look to rebuild our societies after the COVID-19 pandemic, schools should stand at the heart of the recovery, equipping learners with knowledge and skills to contribute and participate in their communities during the digital and green transitions.



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