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*An inclusive school is a school where every child will be welcomed,
every parent will be involved and every teacher will be valued.*

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CONFERENCE REPORT

The Regional Conference “Embracing Diversity through Education” was held in Tirana, Albania on 6-7 November 2013. Organised by the joint European Union and Council of Europe project ‘Regional Support for Inclusive Education’, it was attended by 128 participants from the seven beneficiaries of the region. The participants included representatives of Ministries of Education, Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs; The European Commission, the Council of Europe; EU Integration Offices; academic institutions and NGOs, policy makers, educational professionals, school authorities, primary, secondary and vocational school teachers, school psychologists.

The aim of the conference was to discuss, form strategies and develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in introducing inclusive education systems, following local models and relying on local resources.



Inclusiveness is a relatively new concept in South Eastern European education systems. It is of special importance for the region that historically has always been multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-confessional. Recent conflicts throughout the region left many populations displaced. This, combined with significant Roma populations, gives special prominence to the issues of acceptance, tolerance and inclusiveness.

Exceptionally well organised, the conference proved to be the venue for stimulating debates about diversity in education in its various aspects and levels; a forum for sharing best practices on inclusive education in South East Europe and other Council of Europe member countries.

The conference supported the bottom-up approach to introduce inclusiveness in education and 49 schools signed commitment protocols to implement inclusive principles in their day-to-day practices. The experience gained by these pilot schools will provide policy-makers with workable ideas on how to scale up the effective practices thus identified.



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VISION

At the plenary session with keynote speakers from policy makers, international organisations and educational authorities, a vision for inclusive education was developed:

Every child learns. Children learn in a safe and happy environment. Inclusive education is an integral part of school development. Every school, every teacher, every child, every parent is valued and supported. Diversity is recognised, appreciated and valued by everyone in the education system.

The conference used a highly interactive approach to discussions and all participants had an opportunity to express their points of view. The key pillars on which inclusiveness is rooted being inclusive schools, inclusive policies and inclusive teachers, three corresponding workshops were organised during Day 2 of the conference, each attended by 30 to 40 participants.

The objective of the working groups was to analyse the situation in their respective areas, identify existing practices and challenges and propose future action steps to overcome constraints in a coherent and sustainable manner.

In the plenary session that followed, a joint understanding of the context and reality of inclusive education systems was developed and specific steps to overcome existing challenges were agreed.

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Policy level

Policymakers see their main task as development of inclusive measures and policies to support schools open to diversity, effective for all students regardless of their background, abilities or gender.

On the whole, diversity in education is present in the South East Europe and the concept of inclusive education is understood and accepted by the education authorities. Inclusiveness of education is recognised as one of the key principles of a modern education system. In most countries relevant legislation and bylaws have been developed. New structures and positions were created (i.e. coordinators of inclusive education).



Existing frameworks for monitoring and external evaluation are being adjusted to include inclusiveness. But more work has to be done in this field.

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Awareness of the new approach has been raised in schools and a climate of acceptance is being gradually established amongst students and teachers. There are examples of good will and good collaboration between parents and school staff. Active methods of learning used in schools help to adopt child-focused and interactive teaching techniques and methods.

Awareness raising events have been organised across the region, supported by national strategies. There is a growing understanding of the principles of diversity and inclusiveness among educationalists, but the general public are mostly unaware of the new approaches in education and parents are often ignorant of the advantages and opportunities they offer to their children. Some schools are offering presentations and workshops for parents to help them accept the concepts of diversity and inclusiveness. There are examples of pilot inclusive educational initiatives by NGOs in schools and kindergartens whose positive experience could be built on and extended.

The principle of inclusiveness is also present in life-long *adult education*.

But Inclusive Education Policies do not cover **vocational education and training (VET)**. Limited resources, persisting stereotypes, understaffing and limited ability of teachers to deal with students' special educational needs, are the main challenges that vocational education is facing.

The situation could be improved by addressing the issue of the professional orientation of students from disadvantaged groups already at primary school. Simple low-cost measures could include vocational guidance and counselling, role models and examples from working life. Curricula adaptation also needs further attention, as well as promotion of employment models such as social entrepreneurship. Cross-sectoral cooperation with employment authorities has to be strengthened.

Challenges to promoting equal access to education include lack of school transport, limited support to disabled children, inaccessible school premises as well as absence of a registration system for Roma children.

Poor attendance and high drop-out levels are a common problem across the region. Policies to track absenteeism and identify students at risk of dropping out need to be developed at both national and school levels.

Collaboration between different educational levels (pre-schools, primary schools, secondary school) and between schools and social services needs to be strengthened.

On the whole, more work has to be done for inclusive education strategies and action plans to be translated into school policies and practices.



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Teachers

All moderators noted a high level of commitment and a constructive approach on behalf of teachers to implement inclusive principle in schools. Understanding that support from the ministries would take some time, teachers are ready to take steps that do not require a large amount of financial resources, i.e. peer support, increasing parents' involvement, sharing good practices, development of an online platform for exchanging resources, etc. Such a high level of commitment is a powerful resource in itself to extend the outreach of inclusive education and has to be built on.



Though on the whole the inclusive approach has been accepted and most schools seem to be strongly committed to the principle, national strategies do not easily 'translate' into the field. The understanding of inclusiveness varies from school to school, and not every teacher can explain clearly what it means. There is a lack of clear definitions of diversity and inclusiveness. In some

regions they are associated exclusively with students with special educational needs and Roma students, while in other regions inclusiveness is a synonym for integration of students from migrant and refugee families.

Support to school teachers should start from pre-service teacher training at universities. Universities' curricula have started to include the principle of inclusiveness, but in most universities it is not yet an integral part of training programmes for teachers. Curricula remain quite inflexible and are not tailored to the needs of future teachers.

Teaching tends to be more theoretical than applied and knowledge and skills from the training are not always efficiently implemented at school. Young teachers find it difficult to organise their work in accordance with taught methods and available resources. There is an obvious need for more induction for new teachers.

There is no structure or agency that ensures quality control of teacher training programmes. Many participants questioned the efficiency of the existing practice of licensing teachers (university + induction + exam).

Inclusiveness being a new concept, teachers need guidelines on how to identify special education needs and how to implement the principle of inclusiveness in everyday work. Not all schools have psychologists; school budgets do not always allow for assistant teachers. Commissions for diagnosis of special educational needs are not working properly.



This lack of support to the new approach in education may result in poorly motivated teaching staff. Teachers are instrumental in creating inclusive environments and have to be assisted in every possible way.

There are some positive examples in the region:

- In-service training programmes which include inclusiveness are accredited by governments and are being offered to teachers
- Tailoring of curricula to meet students' individual needs is underway in some regions and pilot schools
- Action plans for working with students with special educational needs (SEN) have been developed
- Individual educational programmes for students with SEN (cerebral palsy, autism, diabetes, dyslexia, epilepsy, ADHD) have been compiled
- Students with SEN are included in mainstream classes and accepted by others
- Peer learning and in-service teacher training projects have been introduced
- Sharing of good practices among schools of the region is proving a valuable resource.

Schools

There is no easy straightforward way to ensure inclusiveness in education – it is a challenging task for educationalists in any country. Overcoming established stereotypes and prejudice is a difficult task and working with teenagers has never been easy in any country! The region lacks experience in creating inclusive school cultures, developing inclusive school policies and implementing inclusive school practices.

Schools of the region provide multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-confessional and multi-lingual environments. Moreover, school populations are a mix of students from rural and urban backgrounds. Nevertheless, many schoolchildren are not sensitive to the needs of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, children with special needs are not always supported by their families. Students from foster families also experience particular difficulties.

The most common impediment to inclusiveness at the school level is inflexibility /rigidity of the mainstream curriculum. Currently it is not inclusive, especially the methodological guidelines. National inspectorates of education as controlling structures do not allow for flexibility in implementation of the curricula.



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This is gradually changing and there are examples of successful adjustment of teaching programmes to meet individual needs of students with SEN. There is a wide range of methods and tools available in the region to help schools embrace and implement the principle of inclusiveness.

In some countries **specialised groups of experts** organised as **mobile teams** have been set up. There is a record of **assistant teachers** that specialise in working with students who experience learning difficulties. Across the region teachers are encouraged to develop **individual education plans** adapted to the needs of students with special needs.

Cross-boarder cooperation between schools with a large percentage of national minorities has been established and some pilots of good practice are being developed (i.e. projects involving Roma students, peer learning, grant schemes to school projects, environmental initiatives).



Many participants noted that extra-curricular activities had proved to be a good practice of inclusion. Sports and cultural events organised by schools foster acceptance and inclusiveness.

Lack of follow-up of children's performance from primary to secondary education is a common failing across the region. There is a need to support the transition from one education level to another, especially for students with special education needs and vulnerable groups. These could be simple no-cost measures like sharing information about each vulnerable student's strengths and needs, assisting with professional orientation and providing encouragement.

Another common problem is inadequate school infrastructure and shortage of basic resources, i.e. computers, textbooks, reading material.

ACTION STEPS

POLICY LEVEL

By legislators:

- Finalise and implement a comprehensive legislative framework for inclusive education
- Develop laws to promote pre-school education as an obligatory part of the educational system



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By relevant ministries:

- Increase public awareness of inclusive education by implementing a comprehensive information campaign at all levels – national, municipal, school level. It should involve closer cooperation with media – print, broadcast, electronic - and adjustment of PR activities.
- Set up a cross-sectoral inter-ministerial commission on inclusive education
- Ministries of Education should allocate special funds for inclusion set up as specific budget lines (i.e. in-service teacher training, human resources, school infrastructure, etc.)
- Intensify collaboration between schools, social care services and health institutions
- In collaboration with academic institutions, develop a *set of criteria* for inclusiveness and basic standards for inclusive education
- Develop and implement consistent policies to support transition from one educational level to another, particularly for students from vulnerable groups
- Facilitate access to the teaching profession as a career for representatives of vulnerable groups (i.e. provide targeted scholarships);
- With regard to VET, establish and strengthen cooperation with the employment sector. Provide support to electronic enrolment systems and facilitate mechanisms whereby every student with special needs has to go through professional schemes.
- Promote pre-school education as an obligatory part of education and ensure sufficient resources are allocated – financial, human, facilities; develop pre-school programmes for children from vulnerable groups.
- High level of drop-out from schools should be a separate topic for further policy analysis and measures to control absenteeism have to be mapped out.

By academic institutions and universities:

- A comprehensive analysis of education policies across the whole education cycle has to be undertaken, based on the relevant experience and practices of the beneficiaries.
- Develop training modules on inclusive education for teacher training courses
- Introduce mainstream inclusiveness in cross-curriculum topics to help students prepare to implement inclusive practices



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- Facilitate partnerships between universities and academic institutions in developing flexible curricula for pre-university education
- Develop e-learning/distance learning courses on inclusive education
- Deliver expert lectures and workshops to school teaching staff and parents on the new inclusive methods

TEACHERS

Teachers are the key players in implementing inclusive principles. They need strong support from educational authorities, school management, local communities and parents.

- Adjust teacher training programmes to strengthen the capacity of teachers to identify and address different kinds of needs in children; develop a new module on inclusive education which should become an integral part of any teacher training curriculum.
- Improve and diversify in-service training to assist teachers gain knowledge and skills of how to work with students with mental and physical impairments
- Improve information systems on inclusive support measures; create an online resource – a platform to discuss inclusiveness issues
- Provide support materials for teachers available online – protocols, assessments tables, etc.
- Mechanisms to motivate and stimulate teachers need to be developed and implemented by school management
- Set up specialised resource centres with mobile teams of professionals that will work with teachers in the field
- Extend the practice of working in teams - teacher, parent, psychologist, school management
- Provide, where possible, assistant teachers to be present in the classroom
- Involve other students to work with children with special educational needs

SCHOOLS

By school management:



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- Develop a new 'school vision', including a logo, a motto and a mission statement reflecting a common understanding of specific inclusive values the school will commit to. The vision is to be reflected in all school activities, materials and publications.
- Develop a more sustainable approach to inclusiveness. Mid-term planning and involvement of the whole staff and local communities could prove to be effective.
- Mainstream curricula need to reflect diversity and inclusiveness. Adjustments have to be made to meet individual needs of students and develop key competences in children. A flexible curriculum is an effective means to embrace inclusiveness.
- Introduce a series of workshops for school management teams on efficient management of existing resources for inclusiveness. Sharing positive experiences across the region and learning from other European countries has proved effective.
- Introduce student mentor programmes to mainstream inclusiveness
- Ensure, where possible, smaller classes at schools; allow for splitting classes into smaller groups for certain types of activities
- Develop monitoring and evaluation systems that track both out-of-school children and attendance in pre-school establishments
- Research models of cooperation between preparatory pre-school and primary school education within South-European and other EU countries; identify and disseminate good practices

By municipalities/ local authorities:

- improve school infrastructure (i.e. provide lifts, adapted toilets, computers, improve assisting technology)
- allocate budgets for evaluation of special educational needs
- ensure transport is available for students
- share across the region examples of strong partnerships between schools and local authorities.

By teachers:

- Apply principles of inclusiveness in everyday activities to make school welcoming for all students regardless of disabilities or limitations.



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- Promote inclusive education philosophy: not to categorise children as belonging to one or another vulnerable group, but develop an education system that meets different kinds of educational needs
- Strengthen school networks, facilitating exchange of experience and lessons learnt; establish cross-border cooperation between schools.

In collaboration with parents:

- organise workshops for parents to increase knowledge and understanding of inclusiveness, special education needs of children and to eliminate biases
- strengthen parents' councils at schools, make parents partners
- offer support to parents through parent-to-parent models
- raise awareness of inclusiveness in local communities and strengthen support to schools by local communities
- involve parents and volunteers in organisation of extra-curriculum activities
- provide support to families in need
- organise humanitarian activities and donations.

