Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education

Final Summary Report

EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

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INTRODUCTION

The high cost of school failure and inequity for individuals – and for society more widely – is increasingly being recognised across Europe. Raising the achievement of all learners is seen not just as a policy initiative, but as an ethical imperative.

Following requests from its member countries, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) conducted the Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education (RA) project (2014–2017). The project examined approaches that directly or indirectly affect young people's motivation and capacity to learn. Such approaches are likely to increase participation and engagement, help to reduce the number of early school leavers and, ultimately, raise the achievement of all learners.

The RA project involved learners, teachers, school leaders, researchers and parents/carers, as well as local and national policy-makers. It set out to explore the pedagogical strategies and teaching approaches that best support learning and are effective in raising the achievement of all learners. It also explored the ways that school leaders can support:

• the development, implementation and monitoring of inputs and processes for raising achievement;
• the participation of learners and parents/carers in the learning process;
• the 'measurement' of all forms of achievement and analysis of outcomes to inform further development.

These issues were considered in the context of national and local policy. The project examined how policy can effectively support learning communities to undertake organisational development and support all stakeholders to work together to raise the achievement of all learners.

The following countries took part in the project: Austria, Belgium (Flemish and French speaking communities), Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales).

Three learning communities provided the focus for project practical activities:

- Istituto Tecnico Agrario Sereni (upper-secondary school) and Istituto Comprensivo Antonio Rosmini (primary and lower-secondary school), Rome, Italy
- Group of Schools in Łajski (primary and lower-secondary school), Commune of Wieliszew, Poland
- Calderglen Learning Community (Calderglen High School and Sanderson High School – co-located mainstream and special schools), East Kilbride, UK (Scotland).

Each participating Agency member country nominated two participants (a researcher and a school leader) to be involved in the project. Each participant was linked to one of the learning communities and visited it twice during the project. Each learning community identified priorities for work and received support via an online project forum. A literature review provided relevant research evidence for the project work (please refer to: **www.european-agency.org/publications/reviews/raising-the-achievement-of-all-learners-in-inclusive-education-literature**).

The learning communities completed a project self-review at the start of the practical work phase and again towards the end of the project. More details about the self-review are available at: **www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/raising-achievement-all-learners-self-review**.

Further evidence for the project was gathered through detailed reports and examples of policy and practice to raise learner achievement from many of the participating countries. The country reports, along with the project conceptual framework, can be found at: **www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/raising-achievement**.

The project methodology is described in full in the Annex of the project overview report *Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education: Lessons from European Policy and Practice* (please refer to: **www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/raising-achievement-all-learners-project-overview**).

BACKGROUND

The RA project work was underpinned by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). These provide a framework for a rights-based approach for all learners. The UN

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities offers further guidance in its *General Comment No. 4* (2016) on the right to inclusive education (please refer to: **www.ohchr.org/ EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/GC.aspx**). These Conventions, together with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 – to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UN, 2015) – support the rights of learners with disabilities. They ensure that such learners are not marginalised or excluded from mainstream education (European Agency, 2015).

The RA project did not focus on inclusion itself, but on achieving valued outcomes for all learners. Inclusion becomes an underlying principle that enables schools to grow more skilled at responding to the differences of individual learners. In this way, schools increase their capability to provide an equitable, high-quality education for all.

The project was also in line with the principles and priorities set at European level. The *Conclusions on Inclusion in Diversity to achieve a High Quality Education for All* stress that: 'equality and equity are not identical and that education systems must move away from the traditional "one-size-fits all" mentality' (Council of the European Union, 2017, p. 4). The European Commission (2017) states that developing the capacity and role of teachers and school leaders is essential to provide a clear strategic vision and leadership that improves all learners' experiences and outcomes – through policies that are both inclusive and flexible.

The RA project addressed issues that affect the experiences of learners from diverse backgrounds, who face different challenges in education. It provides a synthesis of information from varied education systems with examples of evidence-informed approaches that move both policy and practice forward to enable learner success.

PROJECT FINDINGS

The RA project created a Europe-wide learning community, bringing together different perspectives. It encouraged participants to go beyond providing information and instead to critically examine policy and think creatively about the rationale for their own practice. Studying the project learning communities highlighted the need to make best use of resources by using intellectual and social capital for organisational development, change and growth.

As outlined above, the project reinforced the need to move from compensatory approaches, towards more pro-active intervention and prevention approaches that

increase the capacity of all schools to provide high-quality support to all learners. The project supports a view of inclusive education as a 'mega-strategy' for raising the achievement of all learners (Mitchell, 2014, p. 27) by providing challenges that develop teacher practice and school leadership and organisation.

The work of the project learning communities has shown the benefits of:

• measures to address the health and well-being of all learners and support them to recognise that skills and qualities can be developed through appropriately focused hard work and persistence;
• flexible learning opportunities that provide continuity and progression through the phases of education and ensure the relevance of learning for life and work;
• shared leadership and increased collaboration among school staff;
• partnership with parents, carers and families, in order to raise learner aspirations and participation;
• local community and employers' involvement to increase curriculum relevance and work opportunities.

The project also highlighted the need to monitor school development through an 'inclusive lens'. There should be a focus on equity across all school structures and processes (e.g. learner grouping, staff allocation, access to curriculum and wider activities, accreditation of learning and qualifications, resource allocation). Learner attainment and achievement should also be analysed to ensure equitable opportunities to achieve outcomes that matter for future success.

The RA project work also raises the issue of accountability and the need to resolve the conflict between market-based reforms and equity, with wider measures of achievement beyond formal tests. Such measures include personal, social and wider achievement, as well as academic attainment. When learners were consulted at the RA final project conference, their views of success differed widely. This reinforces the need to move away from narrow, standardised measures of attainment, towards more personalised ways to value wider and more authentic outcomes.
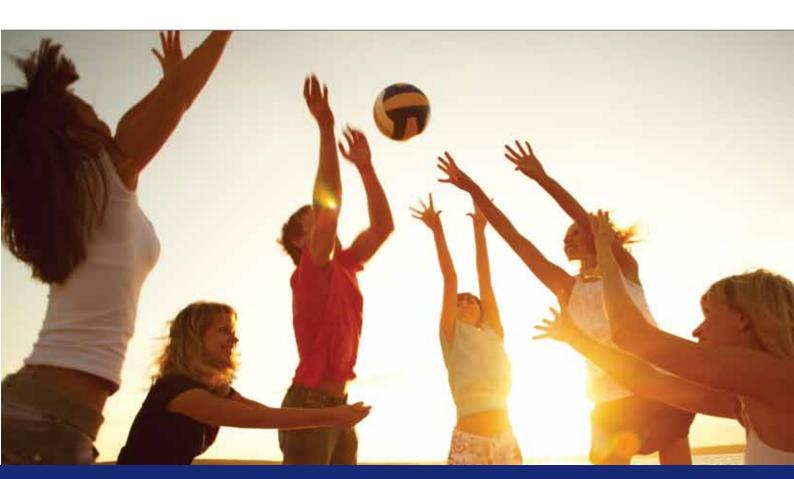
The RA project survey showed that focusing on continuous support for teachers and school leaders can increase schools' capability to raise the achievement of all learners. Project practical work also showed ways to build teachers' professional knowledge and expertise to meet learners' diverse needs. This will enable teachers to develop more

innovative ways to organise learning for all. Such knowledge can be introduced through networking both within the learning community and beyond (e.g. with local universities, other schools/colleges and local specialists) to increase the capacity for evidence-informed practice within the school.

In the RA survey, only a few countries reported the systematic use of stakeholder surveys for quality assurance purposes, even though these can contribute significantly to school improvement processes. During the project, school leaders and teachers were encouraged to work with others on a cyclical self-review process (for more information, please refer to: **www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/raising-achievement-all-learners-self-review**). The project reinforced the idea that monitoring the quality of education is essential for school improvement. This leads to a deeper understanding of structures and processes and their impact on outcomes for all learners.

Finally, the project findings have highlighted provisions that go beyond equality of opportunity to ensure inclusion and progress towards equity. A common characteristic of these provisions is that all stakeholders – teachers, learners, leaders – develop a 'growth mindset', which sees hard work and persistence as contributing to success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The RA project work has shown that to achieve both excellence and equity in high-quality education systems, specific measures are necessary. These include:

- providing resources to schools and systems to enable them to intervene as early as possible to support under-achieving learners and those at risk of dropping out;
- offering innovative approaches and personalised pathways to diverse learners;
- supporting strong strategic leadership which places high importance on equity and improved outcomes for all learners.

The above measures point to the need for a comprehensive overview of the whole system to ensure consistency between different system levels and policy areas. It is important to remember that school-level recommendations need a supportive policy context at regional/national level if they are to be successfully put into practice.

The RA project activities have reinforced the idea that inclusion – and raising achievement – in schools is influenced by, for example, pedagogy, support for learning, leadership, learner well-being and participation, curriculum, collaborative working, school

organisation and support systems. These key areas were explored during the project and provided examples of how policy and practice could be taken forward at both national and local/school levels. The project also focused on policy and practice to develop the collective capacity of all stakeholders and, importantly, the learners themselves to drive school improvement.

The project recommendations below focus on two main target groups:

• School leaders and teachers
• System leaders (at local/regional or national level) and policy-makers.

The RA project findings reinforce the findings and recommendations of previous Agency work, which are also highlighted below.

Recommendations for school leaders and teachers

School leaders play a key role in any educational reform. They must prioritise equity and excellence for all through their decision-making, which affects learner groupings, staff allocation, access to curriculum and accreditation opportunities and resource allocation. It follows that they must also show commitment to on-going professional learning for all teachers and other stakeholders.

School leaders and teachers should:

• **Build a strong leadership team and distribute tasks among stakeholders to ensure sustainability and secure engagement.** Key tasks include the effective use of internal and external data/information to ensure that developments (in teaching and learning, curriculum, assessment and school organisation) provide equitable opportunities for all learners and that all stakeholders are involved in school review and development.

• **Develop a school ethos that supports respectful interactions between all stakeholders.** Language used to talk about learners should avoid labelling/ categorisation. All staff should take responsibility for the success and well-being of all learners within flexible forms of organisation. Dialogue should focus on 'intentionally planning for the success of all students' (EENET, 2017) to provide personalised opportunities for progress. It should also include listening to the learner voice and, through this, increasing participation and engagement.

• **Ensure evidence-informed teaching and learning.** Schools should actively engage with research to support innovative approaches to enable all learners to progress. Systems/partnerships should be developed to ensure access to current research evidence. They should also support school-based research activity, with appropriate time allocated for this form of collaborative professional learning and development.

The RA project activities have further reinforced recommendations from past Agency projects which encourage school leaders and teachers to:

• **Provide a flexible curriculum to ensure relevance to all learners.** This should move beyond academic content to include wider skills in preparation for life, work and personal development (e.g. personal/social skills, arts, sports, etc.). Schools should create opportunities for learner choice to increase engagement and should take account of new further education, training and employment opportunities so that they can prepare all young people to move into positive and sustainable destinations.

• **Develop 'assessment literacy' among teachers and other stakeholders** to enable them to:
   • use assessment information with learners to support further learning;
   • work with colleagues to share their understanding of standards and judgements about learner progress in order to maintain high expectations for all.

• **Build structures/processes that support collaboration with families and specialist services** (e.g. professionals from health, social services, etc.) to improve support for all learners, particularly those with disabilities and more complex support requirements. Specialist knowledge should be shared to build capacity/capability among all stakeholders in the learning community and to avoid stigmatising/segregating learners.

Recommendations for system leaders and policy-makers

According to recent research and project evidence, system leaders and policy-makers should support collaborative approaches within and among schools. They must also ensure that school leaders are enabled to work strategically to build capacity in all staff. The appointment and allocation of staff to schools/learning communities must remain stable over time in order to sustain effective relationships and ensure more equitable outcomes and higher achievement for all learners.

System leaders and policy-makers should:

• **Develop ways to gather and share information on 'what works'** to ensure that evidence is a starting point in formulating policy development, implementation and evaluation. Schools/learning communities should collaborate to develop evidence-informed practice, leadership development and teacher continuous professional development.

The RA project activities, in line with past Agency projects, also encourage system leaders and policy-makers to:

• **Facilitate national dialogue to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education.** Inclusive education should be considered a principle that underpins the progress and achievement of all learners in a system that ensures learning opportunities for all, instead of focusing on placement issues or compensatory approaches.

• **Increase collaboration between national ministries/departments that have a key role in education and support for learners and their families.** Such collaboration should facilitate policy for joint working between services at local level to ensure effective teamwork around learners/families with high levels of need in each community. National policy should also support learning communities in their endeavour to work more closely with parents/families, recognising this as a key factor in learner success.

• **Ensure clarity regarding the functions of formative and summative assessment and work towards an integrated assessment system that is fit for purpose and includes all learners.** Assessment and accreditation systems should be developed to recognise wider learning and success, as well as academic attainment, and ensure that different 'pathways' are equally valued. This should include appropriate opportunities for learners who experience more complex barriers to learning (such as cognitive disabilities).

• **Ensure that policy for initial teacher education and continuous professional development focuses on inclusive education, equity and diversity.** Initial teacher education and continuous professional development should develop teachers' attitudes, values and competences and enable them to use evidence and effectively reflect on and evaluate their own work to secure improvement with a focus on positive outcomes for all learners.

• Undertake a review of accountability and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure they are coherent and support inclusive development. Such structures and processes should provide information about access and equity regarding inputs, processes and outcomes in ways that do not distort practice or marginalise vulnerable learners. They should also empower schools to focus on the progress and achievement of all learners, and not only on what can easily be measured.

Finally, policy-makers need to invest in the short term, which can potentially save money in the longer term. They also need to plan a realistic timescale for any reform. These points have implications for decision-making within political cycles which may be too short to see the impact of any changes introduced.

Such changes need to address social and educational inequality holistically through larger-scale transformation. Small-scale interventions cannot compensate for inequities in a system that is basically unjust.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

Further information is available on the project web area at: **www.european-agency.org/ agency-projects/raising-achievement**. This includes the project conceptual framework and reports on individual countries' approaches to raising achievement. The project has also produced the following outputs:

• A project overview report: *Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education: Lessons from European Policy and Practice*. Refer to: **www.european- agency.org/resources/publications/raising-achievement-all-learners-project-overview**

• *Raising the Achievement of All Learners: A Resource to Support Self-Review*. Refer to: **www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/raising-achievement-all-learners- self-review**

• *Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education – Literature Review*. Refer to: **www.european-agency.org/publications/reviews/raising-the-achievement- of-all-learners-in-inclusive-education-literature**

• Guidance for teachers and school leaders. Refer to: **www.european-agency.org/ agency-projects/raising-achievement**

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