



Changing the Role of Specialist Provision

Final Summary Report



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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Final Summary Report



C R O S P



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Introduction

The rights-based approach to inclusive education, advocated by the United Nations **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) and the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (2006), promotes high-quality education for all. All member countries of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) agree on and are working towards developing inclusive education systems that aim to meet all learners' rights to an inclusive education with their peers in their local communities (**European Agency, 2015**).

Working towards this rights-based goal, countries increasingly recognise the need to change the role of specialist provision. Instead of placing learners who need support in special settings, education systems are moving towards expecting mainstream education professionals to meet diverse needs (**Council of the European Union, 2018; European Agency, 2015**). A key question for many countries is, therefore, to clarify specialist provision's role in supporting all learners' rights to inclusive education.

The **Changing Role of Specialist Provision in Supporting Inclusive Education** (CROSP) project focused on the re-organisation of specialist provision to support the right to inclusive education for all learners. It aimed to identify and analyse challenges and opportunities within country policy and practice that influence the re-organisation and reform of specialist provision towards inclusive education for all learners.

CROSP had two phases:

- Phase 1 (2017–2018) covered a detailed mapping exercise on past and current trends and situations in 26 Agency member countries in relation to specialist provision, as well as on perceived future trends. The **phase 1 synthesis report** is the outcome (European Agency, 2019).
- Phase 2 (2019–2022) built on phase 1's main outcomes, focusing on peer-learning activities. These included thematic workshops with policy-makers from Agency member countries. The peer-learning approach aimed to enable member countries to develop more effective strategies for improving specialist provision's role for inclusive education. Phase 2 concluded with the development of a **roadmap**, in the form of the **CROSP self-review tool**, that provides a holistic overview of policy priorities and strategies, as well as major steps or milestones (i.e. key actions) in the change process.

This report presents the key findings of phases 1 and 2 of the CROSP project.



Phase 1: Mapping specialist provision approaches in European countries

Phase 1 aimed to form a clear overview of the development of specialist provision in meeting learners' rights to education generally, and inclusive education more specifically. It identified and analysed factors within country policy and practice that support the changing role of specialist provision towards inclusive education for all learners.

Twenty-six Agency member countries participated in the phase 1 mapping exercise.

The participating country representatives prepared reports with inputs from their national networks of experts. The reports covered all types of specialist provision that support mainstream provision at compulsory education level. This included support for learners in special schools, units and classes. It also included professionals providing support, advice and guidance to learners and stakeholders from mainstream provision. The reports contained data on the number of special schools, classes and professionals in each country. They also described structures and processes, such as policies, systems of support and transformation processes.

Analysis of the country reports provided key information on:

- specialist provision's current role and main characteristics;
- countries' main policy reforms in relation to specialist provision;
- further policy developments that are needed to transform the role of specialist provision to support inclusive education.

Defining specialist provision

According to the participating countries, their **specialist provision** services consist of additional education, assessment and guidance services for learners, along with further resources for schools, teachers and families. Specialist provision can take the forms of in-school provision, external support and special schools.

These services involve various groups of specialists covering special education, social welfare, rehabilitation, health, early intervention, personal development and transition pathways within the education system.

Agency member countries are actively developing policy to reconceptualise and re-organise specialist provision towards inclusive education. Their main policy reforms involve:

- promoting a rights-based approach;
- reshaping the relationship between mainstream and specialist provision;
- developing new support systems.



Benefits of changing the role of specialist provision

In many countries, the transformation of specialist provision towards inclusive education results in more learners being educated in mainstream settings, as they receive the support they need.

It also leads to positive changes in school-level attitudes towards diversity in learning. Additionally, it increases schools' awareness of the need to develop inclusive and flexible learning environments. Changing specialist provision's role to support inclusion in mainstream classrooms can prevent learner drop-out and help teachers gain skills to support all learners.

These benefits favour greater inclusion and the development of more inclusive systems that provide high-quality education for all learners (European Agency, 2015).

Policy areas that can drive change

Data analysis reveals the need to further enable specialist provision to act as a resource for mainstream provision and to equip stakeholders to implement inclusive education. The transformation of specialist provision into a resource involves four interrelated areas that policy-makers consider relevant. These are:

- Governance mechanisms to support co-operation between specialist and mainstream provision at all levels
- Funding policies and strategies that support specialist provision to act as a resource for inclusive education





- Capacity-building mechanisms that enable specialist provision professionals to effectively support stakeholders in mainstream education
- Quality assurance mechanisms for specialist provision that promote transparent and accountable systems for inclusive education.

These policy areas relate to key components, which have been identified in previous Agency work, for developing efficient, cost-effective resource allocation mechanisms and reducing disparity in education (see **Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems**).

The **CROSP phase 1 synthesis report** (European Agency, 2019) contains more information on the phase 1 findings. An **animated video** and an **infographic** conveying key messages from phase 1 are also available on the **CROSP web area** (www.european-agency.org/activities/CROSP).

Phase 2: Developing a roadmap for changing the role of specialist provision

Building on phase 1's key findings, phase 2 specifically aimed to enable member countries to develop more effective strategies to improve the transformation of the role of specialist provision for the implementation of inclusive education.

CROSP followed a peer-learning approach. Based on existing approaches and methodologies (i.e. **Andrews and Manning, 2015**) and previous Agency work (i.e. **Country Policy Review and Analysis; Financing Policies for Inclusive Education Systems**), this engaged policy-makers with a shared professional focus and knowledge in pre-agreed activities and discussions with each other.

The peer-learning approach had three interrelated aims:

- **A content-related aim**, including systematic learning between countries. The goal was to go beyond sharing information and provide a forum for structured reflection on policy challenges.
- **A process-related aim**, including collaborative review and self-reflection. This allowed countries to learn from each other, by identifying the strengths and challenges of existing policies and strategies for changing the role of specialist provision towards inclusive education.
- **An outcome-related aim**, including the joint development of the CROSP self-review tool, as well as national-level dissemination and follow-up activities.

The CROSP phase 2 activities

The peer-learning approach encompassed **two rounds of thematic workshops**. A final conference with all Agency member countries took place in 2022.



During the first round of workshops, country representatives discussed effective national/regional/local policies and strategies, as well as common and country-specific challenges and experiences related to four thematic areas: governance, funding, capacity building and quality assurance.

In the second round of workshops, countries discussed six agreed guiding principles (the **'why'**) and how these can be translated into policy priorities/strategies (the **'what'**) and then into concrete actions (the **'how'**). The workshops also focused on the design and dissemination of the CROSP self-review tool.

To actively involve all participants in the discussions, both rounds of workshops had a 'dialogic' structure. All participants were assigned a role and structured exchanges took place.

In addition to the two rounds of thematic workshops, the peer-learning process continued through two online meetings. These enabled participants to progress with the framework for developing the tool.

The peer-learning approach underwent formative evaluation. This assessed whether peer engagements allowed for learning outcomes that can help countries achieve changes in the process towards specialist provision's new role in supporting inclusive education. The **formative evaluation** (European Agency, 2022) of the CROSP peer-learning methodology is available on the CROSP web area.

The CROSP overarching framework

Analysis of the CROSP thematic workshops highlighted several **guiding principles, policy priorities** and **strategies**, as well as **key actions** supporting the re-orientation of the role of specialist provision to support inclusive education. These findings were organised into a wider framework that includes all the essential elements for the change process.

1. Guiding principles

Guiding principles are overarching principles that underpin the implementation of policies and strategies and stakeholders' ability to implement inclusive education on a daily basis.

They can be seen as **umbrella themes** closely linked to the changing role of specialist provision. They provide stakeholders from mainstream and specialist provision with a shared vision of the role of specialist provision, thus supporting co-operation. They align with and provide additional evidence to the Agency's recent **Key Principles** (2021) that support the implementation of inclusive policy development and practice.



Six mutually complementary guiding principles constitute the overall CROSP framework:

Guiding principle 1: Developing a shared commitment to inclusive education

All stakeholders should develop common values and a shared commitment to providing all learners with high-quality learning opportunities in mainstream settings. Specialist provision for learners who need support should build upon a socio-pedagogical approach, not a medical one.

Guiding principle 2: Promoting knowledge exchange and acquiring inclusive competences through co-operation and networking

Decision-makers and education professionals from both the mainstream and specialist sectors should exchange knowledge through collaboration at all educational levels, as well as local/regional/national levels.

Guiding principle 3: Providing continuous professional learning on inclusion

Continuous learning opportunities should be provided to all staff from specialist and mainstream provision, including those with leadership roles (i.e. aiming to instil inclusive skills and competences).

Guiding principle 4: Supporting inclusive school leadership and management

A universal design approach to teaching and learning should act as a resource and underpin the work of professionals with leadership roles from both the mainstream and specialist sectors.

Guiding principle 5: Encouraging stakeholders' active involvement

Families, learners and other community stakeholders should be supported to participate actively in the learning and teaching process.

Guiding principle 6: Promoting on-going monitoring and evaluation

All staff from specialist and mainstream provision should work towards a whole-school approach focusing on barriers to and facilitators of teaching and learning.



2. Policy priorities and strategies

Each guiding principle is connected to policy priorities and strategies that countries identified as effective practices during the workshops. These are **long-term aims** for policies to pursue regarding the changing role of specialist provision.

Each guiding principle comprises some main policy priorities and strategies that support the changing role of specialist provision and also complement each other. Countries see these policy priorities and strategies as fundamental for meeting the values expressed in the guiding principles.

3. Key actions

Each policy priority and strategy can be broken down into key actions, as **examples of effective implementation** of the associated policies and strategies. These cover issues of **funding, governance, capacity building** and **quality assurance** that enable stakeholders to implement the policies and strategies they refer to.

The key actions consider:

- What should be done
- How it should be done
- How to check effectiveness.

As Figure 1 shows, each guiding principle is linked to several policy priorities and strategies as well as to several key actions, to be considered holistically.

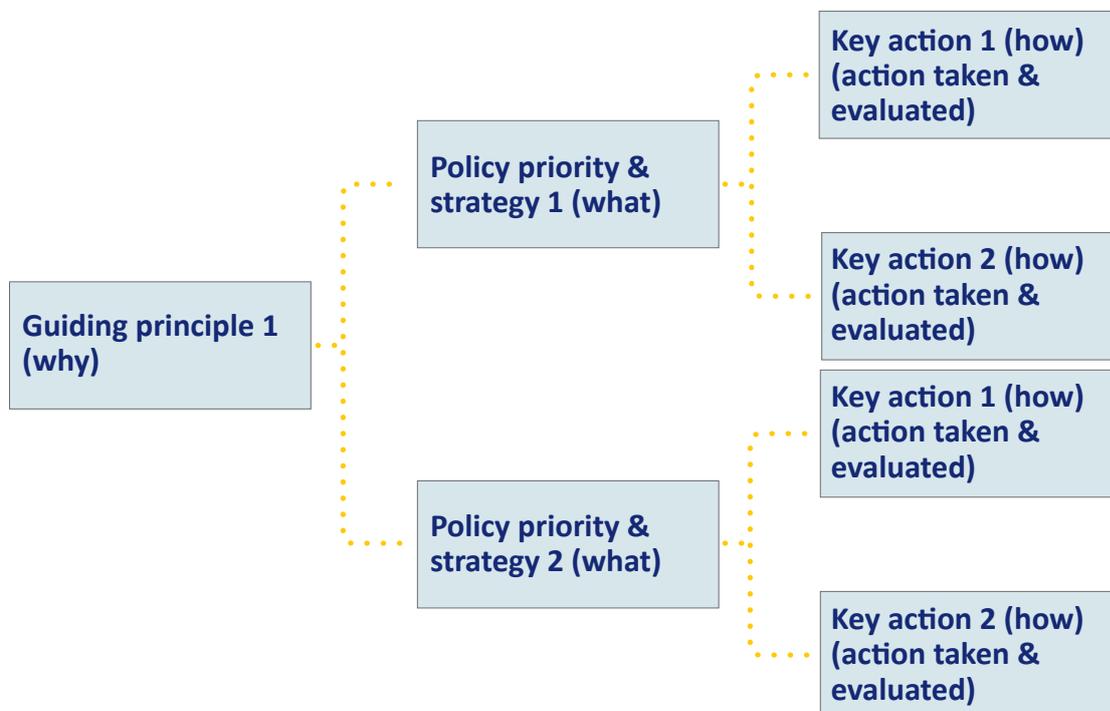


Figure 1. Connections between guiding principles, policy priorities/strategies and key actions



The CROSP self-review tool: a roadmap towards changing the role of specialist provision

The CROSP framework was the basis for developing a **roadmap for changing the role of specialist provision**. This roadmap provides a holistic overview of policy priorities and strategies and the major steps or milestones for effective implementation.

It particularly aims to:

- help countries to assess/monitor their own situations, by identifying strengths and weaknesses and where they are in their journeys towards changing the role of specialist provision;
- support countries to define policy areas that need further development and next steps to be taken, along with responsibilities of all stakeholders.

Overall, this roadmap connects the 6 guiding principles with 17 policy priorities and strategies, as shown in Figure 2.



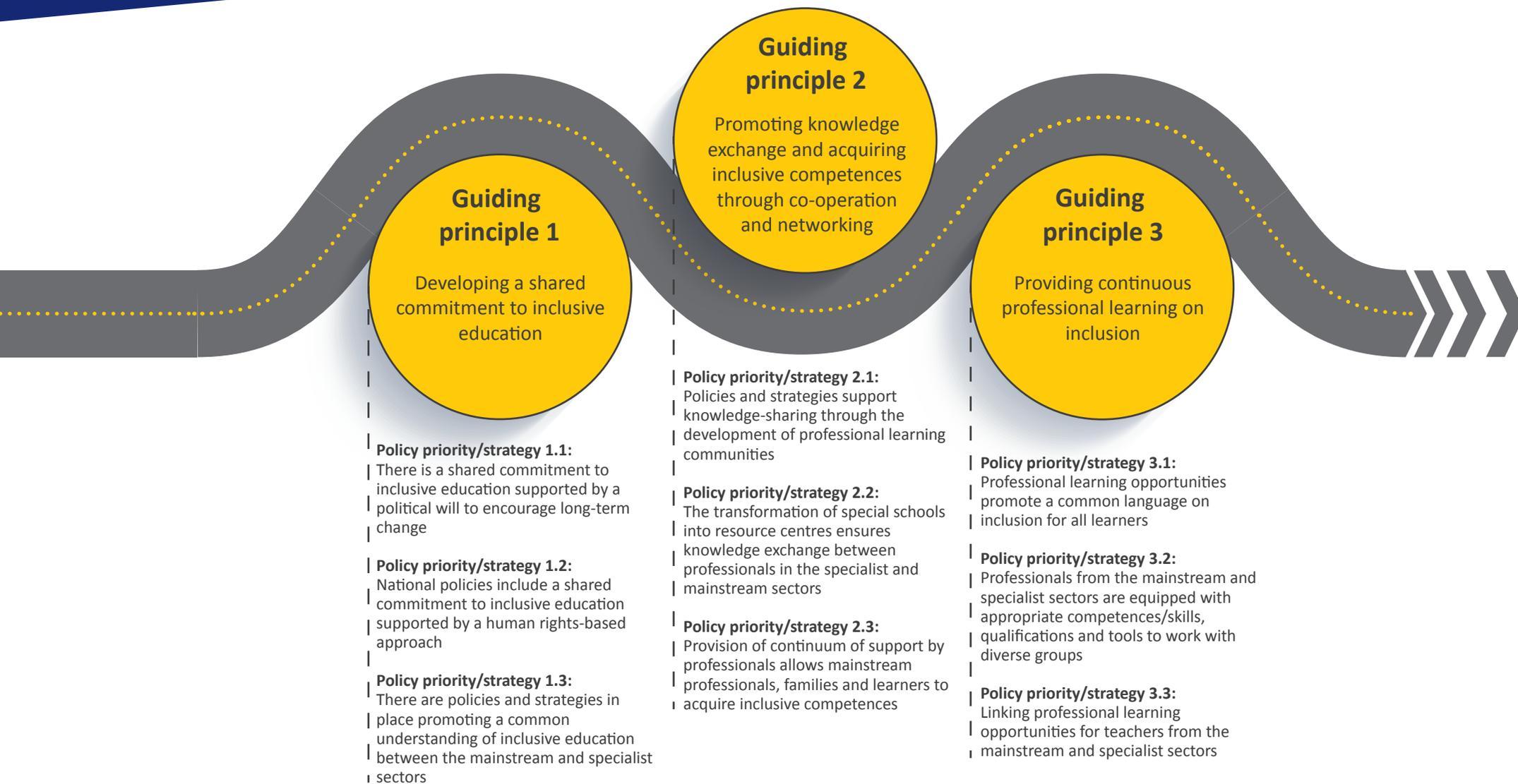


Figure 2. The CROSP roadmap



Guiding principle 4

Supporting inclusive school leadership and management

Policy priority/strategy 4.1:

School leaders promote an inclusive vision, including mutual values, a common language and understanding, and a holistic approach

Policy priority/strategy 4.2:

Ensuring capabilities and confidence of school leadership from both the mainstream and specialist sectors to support inclusive education

Policy priority/strategy 4.3:

School leadership and management support inclusive education through collaboration

Guiding principle 5

Encouraging stakeholders' active involvement

Policy priority/strategy 5.1:

There are comprehensive national policies and strategies in place that have been developed following a broad consultation with all stakeholders, with clear political vision and will

Policy priority/strategy 5.2:

Policy ensures that learners and families are the main actors and are considered a key resource in the learning and teaching process

Guiding principle 6

Promoting on-going monitoring and evaluation

Policy priority/strategy 6.1:

There are national indicators of quality inclusive education that consider local variation, the diversity of learners' needs and the role of specialist provision

Policy priority/strategy 6.2:

There are co-operative structures/processes in place for monitoring and evaluation

Policy priority/strategy 6.3:

There is a comprehensive system for monitoring how specialist provision supports the mainstream sector in implementing inclusive education (covering the sub-systems of internal and external evaluation)



The **CROSP self-review tool** includes all the guiding principles, policy priorities/strategies and indicative key actions in the form of self-reflective questions.

This tool is mainly aimed at decision-makers at national/regional/local level, as well as professionals at school level. It can enable decision-makers and other professionals to reflect and develop a continuum of support for inclusive education.

The CROSP tool is an **open-source document**. Countries can build upon it to validate it and adapt it to their national contexts. It is important to treat the tool as an evolving instrument. Countries are encouraged to:

- translate the issues, definitions and items into national educational realities;
- co-operate and form networks in practice at cross-ministerial, cross-territorial and cross-professional level;
- use the tool as a means to ensure stakeholders' engagement in the changing role of specialist provision.

Final remarks

Countries' journeys towards re-organising specialist provision may take different paths. However, all countries should consider it a phased, on-going process that follows the same principles and the same key goal of providing high-quality education to all learners.

The CROSP project provided background knowledge and suggested an overarching framework towards this goal. The CROSP tool, as the project's main outcome, can serve as a resource for initiating or continuing the on-going process of supporting the changing role of specialist provision.

The tool permits knowledge transfer among professionals from mainstream and specialist provision by engaging them in collective reflection and action towards developing inclusive education systems.

Countries may also see the tool as a stimulus for discussion, with the aim of collectively defining shared values, a common language, strategies and actions, as well as specific implementation plans. It allows for cross-national co-operation, with different countries acting as 'critical friends', sharing experiences and providing mutual support.

It is hoped that this tool will be further adapted and validated for use in national contexts and will help countries in their efforts to develop more inclusive education systems.



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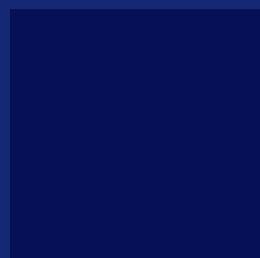


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