Cross-Sector Collaboration and Governance in Inclusive Education Systems

Background paper for the Advancing Collaboration in Education and Collaborative Action for Inclusive Education activities

ACE

ADVANCING COLLABORATION IN EDUCATION

CAFIE

COLLABORATIVE ACTION FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND GOVERNANCE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

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CONTENTS

PREAMBLE

This background paper aims to provide a conceptual foundation, inspiration and working models on the topic of cross-sector collaboration (CSC) for inclusion. It stems from the Advancing Collaboration in Education (ACE) and Collaborative Action for Inclusive Education (CAFIE) work within the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) Thematic Country Cluster Activities (TCCA).

The paper serves as a think piece for policy- and decision-makers working towards or within inclusive education. It aims to deepen the understanding of CSC as a systemic and strategic approach to inclusion – one that requires alignment across policy areas, governance levels and professional domains.

Based on the priorities formulated in the ACE and CAFIE activities and informed by the literature collected and outlined in *Towards a Multi-Level, Multi-Stakeholder Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Accountability Framework* (European Agency, 2024), this background paper highlights relevant trends, systemic needs and promising directions for cross-sector work for inclusive education. In addition, it presents conceptual models and implementation approaches that can be adapted to national and local contexts as exemplary methods and practices.

The paper concludes with a set of key questions developed to prompt further reflection and dialogue among policy-makers and practitioners. These questions, together with elements of CSC outlined throughout the paper, are intended to support the development of inclusive education systems that are collaborative, coherent and sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

Multiple factors exist beyond schools that limit learners' educational opportunities and life chances. The 'complexity of vulnerability', which lies at the heart of inclusion, underlines that schools cannot work on their own and calls for more systemic, 'ecological' responses (Edwards and Downes, 2013, p. 9). Inclusive education is a process of school improvement that values diversity and addresses learners' vulnerabilities to enhance everyone's learning. Collaboration among different stakeholders within and across all levels of the education system and related policy areas is required. Inclusive education itself is intrinsically complex due to the many relationships that need to be established. As such, there are many challenges for cross-sector work for inclusion.

First, taking a multi-level view to ensure consistent policy approaches throughout the education system, CSC requires strategies at the national level. National-level decision-makers, such as ministries, must collaborate to 'link what schools can do with what other sectors', such as health, justice, housing, employment, youth and welfare, can offer (ibid.). By co-operating at the national level, ministries can facilitate the co-ordination and integration of services into multi-service provision.

Currently, there is a lack of integration across policy areas and levels of education (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021). Long-standing norms, traditions and working cultures seem to hinder the transition from 'siloed' service delivery to new ways of co-operation between education and other sectors (Patana, 2020).

At local level, where stakeholders are brought together, school-to-school networks emerge and CSC with local services is implemented. However, in many cases, co-ordination has yet to be systematically mandated (European Agency, 2024). Achieving this requires a deeper understanding of collaboration and cross-sector work for inclusive education and its relevance for different stakeholders. Across all levels, identifying and conceptualising new structures and processes may shed light on cross-sector work and new forms of governance needed.

In addition, the growing complexity of the education system has led to new forms of professionalism and challenges for genuine interprofessional collaboration, which need further exploration (Edwards and Downes, 2013; Mezza, 2022; Noordegraaf, 2020).

Second, implementing cross-sector work is a major challenge. It requires a full understanding of the process, as well as effective implementation planning that addresses shared goals and considers each stakeholder's position and role in the collaboration. In this regard, guidance can support the implementation of CSC for inclusion. Examples from other sectors may provide inspiration, but will need adjustments based on collaborative practice in inclusive education.

Finally, following on from the abovementioned challenges and findings, further discussion on CSC raises questions about leadership in cross-sector work, impact, quality assurance and accountability.

The challenges above emerged in a recent literature review on multi-level and multi-stakeholder quality assurance, monitoring and accountability (European Agency, 2024). EASNIE member countries highlighted them as priorities for thematic cluster work on

collaboration and cross-sector co-operation. As these challenges may affect the implementation and success of collaborative strategies, cross-sector work and inclusion itself, this paper will focus on:

- identifying key processes that enable CSC for inclusive education, different stakeholder perspectives and the 'new governance' and 'new professionalism' this entails;
- working models and implementation tool(s) for policy- and decision-makers at regional/national level to implement CSC;
- key questions for policy-makers and practitioners to implement CSC at the school and community level.

KEY PROCESSES ENABLING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION FOR INCLUSION

To better understand cross-sector work for inclusion, key concepts and processes will be identified that enable CSC at the school, community and national level, and across levels, services and departments of the education system.

First, this paper describes the integration of services and departments as a result of, and a lever for, CSC in inclusive education. Next, it highlights the professionalism and governance needed to achieve and maintain this.

Networks of multi-level and multi-stakeholder collaboration

Inclusive education requires all education levels to innovate, collaborate and expand roles and responsibilities. To ensure equal educational opportunities for all, education must extend its co-operation to other areas, such as social, health, labour, justice, youth and welfare departments, that are involved in family needs and that may affect the learning opportunities of children, young people and adults.

The scope of the collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination required to achieve inclusive education covers a wide range of horizontal and vertical partnerships, as Figure 1 shows.

Vertical partnerships in inclusive education systems reflect the multi-level collaborative processes between government levels (national, regional, local and school level) and, in particular, between education levels. **Horizontal collaboration** refers to cross-sector initiatives that emerge in inclusive education policy and practice, at different levels of the system, between multiple departments or agencies, across boundaries between units of a single department or agency, or between public, private and voluntary sectors (Ferguson, 2009). It may involve non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and universities – for example, to support technological innovation, to ensure advocacy of learners and families or research on inclusive practice.

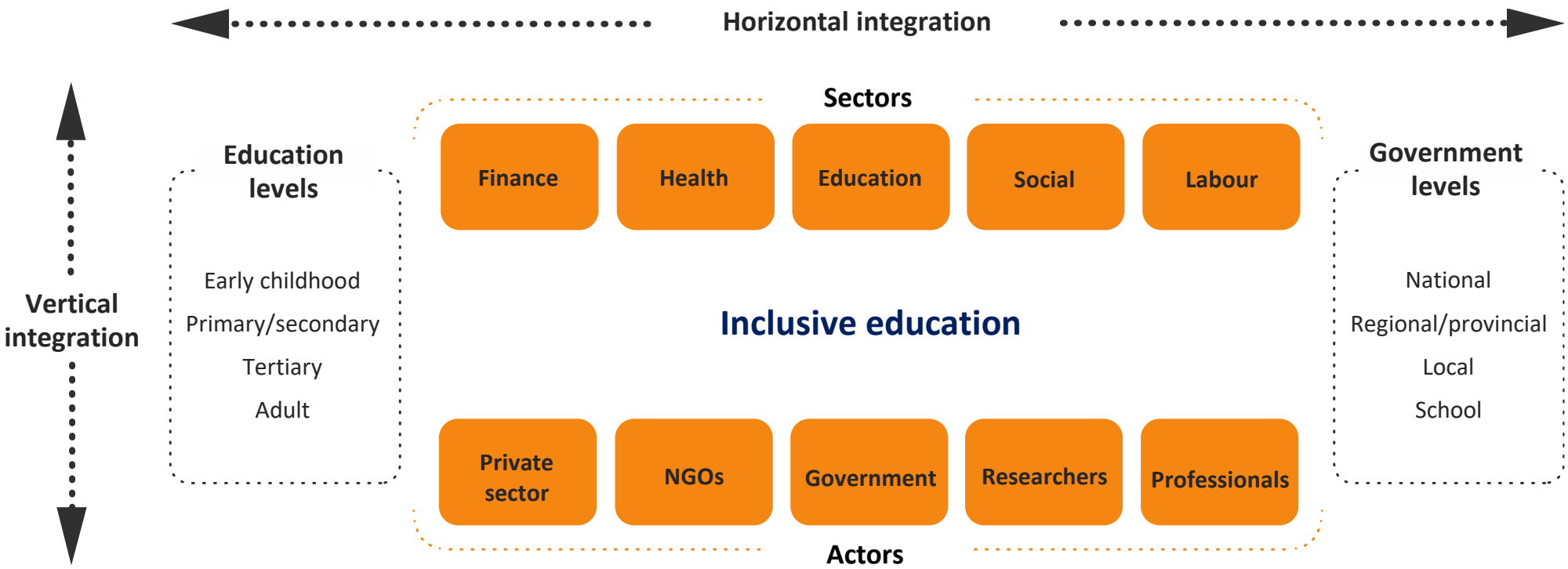


Figure 1. Conceptual mapping of partners needed for inclusive education ***(adapted from UNESCO, 2020, p. 89)***

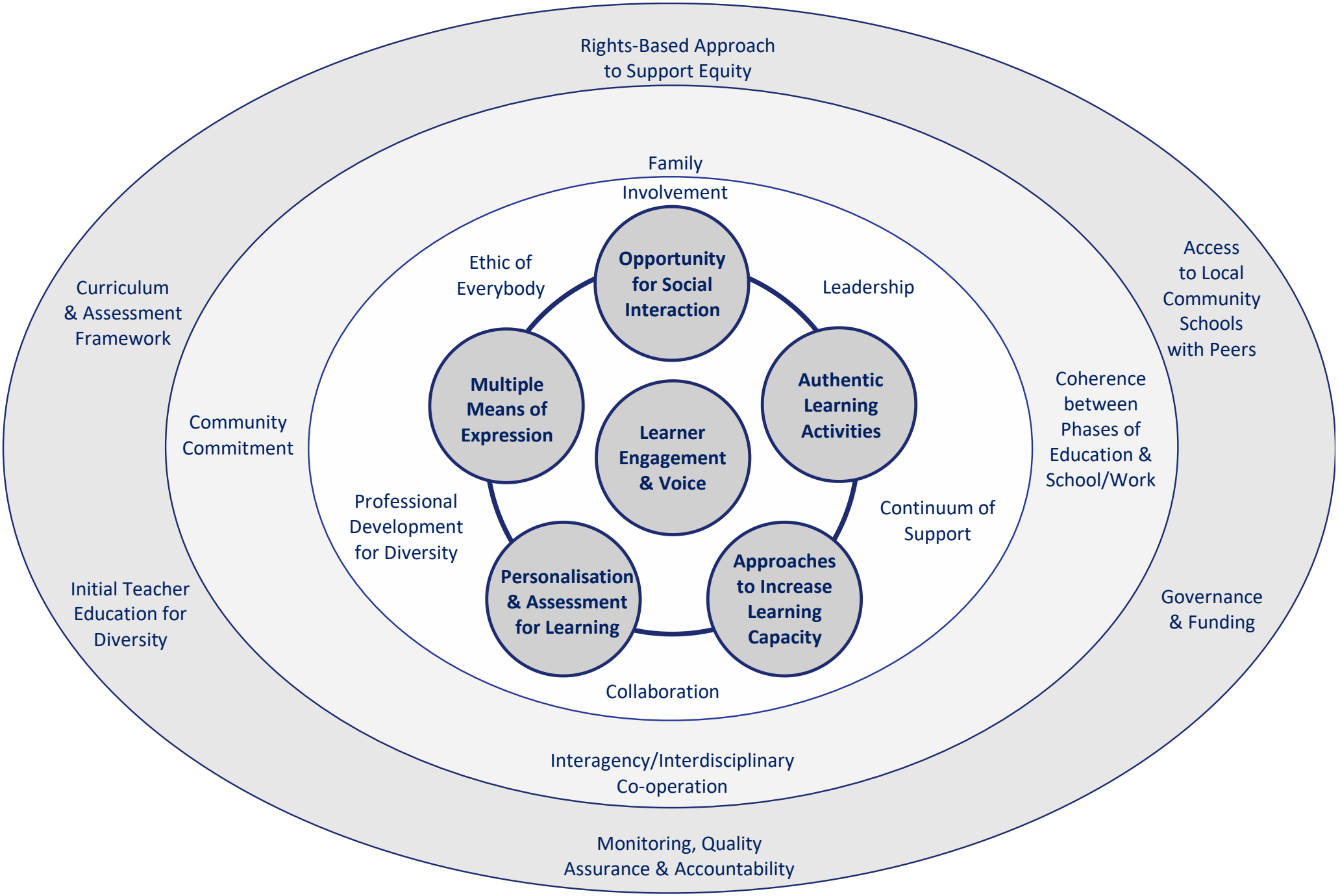
Within this multi-dimensional scope of collaboration, inclusive education requires national/regional education policies to adopt more systemic, 'ecological' responses. These include preventive measures and interventions in families and communities, alongside direct educational learner support (Edwards and Downes, 2013). This involves professionals and non-professional citizens and must overcome traditional divides between them.

By mapping partnerships created for this purpose, new structures and processes can be conceptualised that facilitate collaboration and communication among all levels of education, sectors and actors. These partnerships may operate along one dimension – for example, working vertically across all education levels or horizontally with one or two departments at the same level of the system. In reality, a more complex picture emerges, when collaboration extends across levels and sectors and involves **networks of multi-level and multi-stakeholder collaboration**. These are also referred to as **alliances**, **joint ventures**, **co-actions**, **partnerships** and **interdepartmental actions**.

A variety of networks is conceivable when partners are represented as subsystems in the ecosystem of inclusive education processes, as shown in Figure 2. By outlining an ecosystem model for inclusive education systems development, EASNIE aims to contribute to the understanding of structures and processes that enable collaboration and effective communication at all system levels: 'between ministries, regional- and local-level decision-makers and between services and disciplines, including non-governmental organisations and schools' (European Agency, 2021, p. 20). The ecosystem model allows policy- and decision-makers at all levels of the education system to explore CSC and partnerships, to ensure coherent and targeted support and responsibilities of multiple actors and to reach innovative solutions and effective results (European Agency, 2024; European Commission, 2023).

Putting the learner in the centre, the model reflects the dynamics within and between different system levels. It recognises the importance of relationships and collaboration between all actors and between the elements of the education system that support schools and learners.

Figure 2. The ecosystem of support for inclusive education model (source: European Agency, 2017, p. 11) (next page)


Rights-Based Approach to Support Equity
Family Involvement
Ethic of Everybody
Opportunity for Social Interaction
Leadership
Curriculum & Assessment Framework
Access to Local Community Schools with Peers
Multiple Means of Expression
Authentic Learning Activities
Community Commitment
Learner Engagement & Voice
Coherence between Phases of Education & School/Work
Professional Development for Diversity
Continuum of Support
Personalisation & Assessment for Learning
Approaches to Increase Learning Capacity
Initial Teacher Education for Diversity
Governance & Funding
Collaboration
Interagency/Interdisciplinary Co-operation
Monitoring, Quality Assurance & Accountability

At the school and community levels, **school-to-school networks** have the potential to build positive and trusting relationships and to demonstrate a culture of collaboration instead of competition between schools (European Agency, 2024). Furthermore, collaboration beyond the school, through **partnerships with the local community**, brings greater benefits for all. These include extended opportunities for learners in the community and the efficient use of **cross-sector expertise and services**, which play a key role, especially for learners with additional support needs. Within school-to-school networks, **integrated services** can bring stakeholders together, set targets and ensure coherence in inclusive school development.

At national level, in developing **national policy for inclusion**, education departments must be fully aware of what other sectors can offer. More integration of government departments, across ministries of education, health, social work, labour, finance and others, may be needed. The role of national policy for inclusion is to encourage and promote inter-agency and inter-disciplinary co-operation, enabling all stakeholders to provide cohesive services and a continuum of support at the school and community level. It must also monitor developments, take action to increase capacity and give real decision-making and management power, together with appropriate funding, to lower levels (Bernbaum, 2011; European Agency, 2019).

Cross-sector work at the ministerial level also involves co-operation with local governments and non-government partners. Therefore, it must be sensitive to local conditions, as simple generalisations cannot be made (Edwards and Downes, 2013). In addition, it involves collaboration with the research community and international platforms, to support the development of integrated services and to ensure appropriate co-ordination, communication, protocols, capacity and financing (UNESCO, 2020).

The complexity of multi-agency collaboration, partnerships, networks and integrated service delivery and their new tasks poses significant challenges to policy development. To develop true **synergies** across policy fields and partners, cross-sector work for inclusion must be underpinned by **shared values and clear goals**. It must operate in a context of a holistic and equitable view of education, with a focus on increased opportunities for interaction, a sense of belonging and well-being (Cobigo, Ouelette-Kuntz, Lysaght and Martin, 2012; Edwards and Downes, 2013; Patana, 2020). If co-operating services and organisations have different missions and ambitions, this may hinder the synergy needed (Weeks, 2022). Above all, the complexity of CSC challenges traditional ways of governing.

New governance for co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation

Within a wider range of horizontal professional and social networks, steering from one centre or logic or central government is no longer effective (OECD, 2013; Theisens, 2012). Theisens, Hooge and Waslander (2016) point out that, in more complex policy and education systems:

> Power has moved away from central governments in different directions: upwards towards international organisations, sideways to private institutions and non-governmental organisations and downwards towards local

governments and public enterprises such as schools and hospitals (ibid., p. 463).

A **new governance approach** is needed to deal with a wide range of stakeholders and to co-ordinate joint educational practice across sectors and system levels more effectively. This approach includes **co-creation** processes, **new professionalism** and **leadership**, emerging through the many dynamic and fluid interactions within and between the various levels of the education system and support services.

Governance is defined as the process of setting priorities, formulating and implementing policies, and ensuring accountability. In complex networks with many different actors, governance replaces decision-making and control by a central government (Pierre and Peters, 2005). Theisens et al. (2016) describe **'new public governance'** as an approach based on horizontally-organised systems with multiple centres of power which collaborate **through networks**. Governments are either actors in these networks or they steer through the networks, creating the arena in which networks operate – for example, by establishing frameworks for collaboration or facilitating knowledge exchange.

This approach, in which many centres of decision-making exist and in which state and non-state actors regulate highly complex and interdependent relations, is **'polycentric'** (Ostrom et al., 1961, in Ehren et al., 2017, p. 366). It is opposed to monocentric forms of steering, where the national government is the only locus of authority and the central actor in defining and deciding on societal issues through policy guidelines, monitoring and control.

In a polycentric approach, networks of schools and their stakeholders take a prominent role in defining, regulating and shaping education quality. By creating 'conditions for responsiveness', the government expects schools to collaborate, 'to learn from each other, to find ways to effectively develop and implement solutions to local problems and to have the capacity to respond to changing circumstances' (Ehren et al., 2017, p. 366).

Characterised by networks of agencies or stakeholder groups, new governance mechanisms cover a range of approaches to policy development, service delivery and management. These replace hierarchical leadership with **collaboration**, **co-ordination**, **shared responsibility** for decisions and outcomes, and a willingness to work through **consensus** (Ehren et al., 2017; Ehren and Perryman, 2017; Ferguson, 2009; Phillips, 2006).

In relation to inclusive education systems, Patana (2020) distinguishes four mechanisms:

- **Co-ordination** – for example, co-ordination of services to support access, reduce duplication and ensure a holistic service delivery
- **Co-location** of agencies at a single site
- **Collaboration** in inter-agency work, professional learning and the development of a network of providers
- **Co-operation** to achieve integrated service delivery.

As an example, participants in early childhood alliances learned that successful collaboration requires a new type of **leadership**. This is owned by several community organisations, stakeholder groups of non-profit organisations, government agencies, foundations and local businesses, all fostering early childhood success. Active 'culture-

building', or the practice of **building trust**, is pivotal, aligning the beliefs of change, ways of working and behaviour that will lead to success, and creating the space and taking the risks needed to innovate (Brenner, 2018).

However, the question of who is responsible for oversight and steering remains, considering a general trend in education towards comparability of outcomes across regions and countries (Wilkoszewski and Sundby, 2014). In **multi-level governance** in decentralised contexts, an inherent asymmetry persists between the various governance levels. This leads to governance 'haziness' and gaps in major areas such as information, policy, objectives, capacity and accountability (ibid., p. 9). For instance, flexible co-operation was found to be hindered by curricular constraints and standardised testing (Paulsrud and Nilholm, 2023).

To close these gaps, a combination of legal regulations and 'soft governance' mechanisms is often applied. Different methods of soft governance in education systems include **consultation schemes**, **collaboration programmes** and the **open method of co-ordination**. Wilkoszewski and Sundby (2014) present case studies on each of these:

- **Consultation schemes** on education policies between the central level and a network of municipalities in Norway
- **Collaboration programmes** between various education actors across governance levels to foster local education governance in Germany
- The **open method of co-ordination** working through centrally set goals and benchmarks for monitoring progress in different contexts in the European Union.

All these methods share three commonalities:

- A multi-staged policy process based on formulating goals, delegating implementation to the lower level, facilitating and monitoring implementation through a knowledge system, peer learning and benchmarks, feedback from more actors, and progress reports on reforms
- Transparency and publicity
- Soft sanctions through positive or negative peer pressure and stakeholder commitment (ibid.).

New professionalism based on interprofessional collaborative learning

Steered through networks and based on polycentric thinking instead of hierarchical power, CSC also entails a **new professionalism**. Noordegraaf (2020) observes that, for a long time, many professionals in specialised fields worked within well-defined jurisdictions, were granted autonomy and had discretionary spaces. Decisions were authoritative and accepted. This is no longer the case due to fragmentation, the interweaving and interdependency of professional fields, and growing demands from administrators, civil servants and vocal citizens (Gradener and Spierts, 2021; Noordegraaf, 2020).

In search of professional identities that match the interdependencies and collaborative requirements of cross-sector work, 'protective professionalism' must make way for less binary, more hybrid or '**connective professionalism**'. This focuses on 'how professional action can be related to others and outsiders and remain "knowledgeable", "autonomous", and "authoritative" at the same time' (Noordegraaf, 2020, p. 210). Professional identities:

> … can no longer be a matter of expertise, autonomy, and authority as fixed and closed entities. These crucial dimensions of professional action become relational and processual. They have to be enacted on a continuous basis, backed by mechanisms that make professionalism knowledgeable, independent, and authoritative in the eyes of others (ibid., p. 205).

Connective professionalism is grounded in a relational view of everyday professional work. In today's heterogenous contexts, professionalism is moving towards a more dynamic view, acknowledging the added value of **interprofessional work** and **collaboration with non-professional stakeholders**. Referring to different ways of working together, such as grassroots networks that form around individuals or electronic networks among professionals, Schot, Tummers and Noordegraaf point out that interprofessional collaboration must be understood as 'an ideal typical way of working together' (2020, p. 333). It implies an **integrated perspective** between workers from diverse backgrounds, with distinctive professional cultures and possibly representing different organisations or sectors, providing services for the benefit of individuals, and 'smooth working relations in the face of **highly connected and interdependent tasks**' (ibid.).

Connectedness is crucial in the new professionalism that underpins educational support in inclusion. However, it does not diminish the demand for **professional standards** and clearly defined roles. For example, as a response to integrated service delivery, Giangreco, Prelock and Turnbull (2010) stress the need for each professional field to maintain its **code of ethics** and **scope of practice** and to facilitate appropriate personnel use and service delivery planning. The proposed new professionalism may even strengthen traditional professional shields or protective mechanisms, such as the use of professional standards or peer review, instead of managerial control. It may also limit professional spaces to assess and address problems in terms of these standards, when maintaining a bureaucratic logic of standardisation and protocols based on the demands of administrators, civil servants and managers that have little to do with the work itself (Alvehus, Avnoon and Oliver, 2021; Gradener and Spierts, 2021). However, scepticism about the feasibility of connective professionalism does not stand in the way of a genuine ambition for new forms of professionalism to overcome this apparent paradox of connectedness and autonomy, ambiguity and well-defined expertise (Alvehus et al., 2021).

How connected professionals can still act as 'autonomous and authoritative experts' (ibid., p. 200) is a key topic in research on interprofessional collaboration. Evidence suggests that interprofessional collaboration is not the work of policy-makers, but is actively developed

by professionals. Professionals from different fields make different contributions, but interprofessional collaboration is demonstrated in three distinct ways:

- 'by bridging professional, social, physical and task-related gaps', also referred to as '**boundary spanning**';
- 'by **negotiating overlaps** in roles and tasks';
- 'by **creating spaces** to be able to' collaborate across professional fields or by taking a more informal, improvisational organisational stance (Schot et al., 2020, pp. 332–339).

Differences exist between collaborative settings and subsectors. This confirms the dynamic and relational view of professionalism and recalls the need for interprofessional collaboration to be brought about by professionals instead of being organised by managers and policy-makers.

In practice, these different forms of collaboration take place in schools. Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) identified **factors that facilitate or constrain interprofessional collaboration**, such as co-teaching, consultative practices or mixed forms of collaboration in schools. Factors supporting interprofessional collaboration are equal distribution of power and responsibilities, and support from school management – for example, by providing professional learning opportunities or planning time. Barriers are related to curricular constraints and standardised testing. This underlines the need for national policy to consider the conditions and responsibilities of school staff to develop inclusive practice and to facilitate interprofessional collaboration.

Looking at primary education settings in New Zealand, it was found that in practice, interprofessional collaboration is often limited in space (the classroom), number (pairs working together) and even commitment, as a response to an immediate need (Fenwick and Kelly, 2023). Similarly, a Finnish study found that consultative roles outside and between classrooms are not yet a regular part of most special educators' work, as their focus is on supporting learners with different needs in the classroom (Mihajlovic, 2020). These findings suggest that interprofessional collaboration in schools often 'remains a "siloed entity" done in addition to and exclusive from the rest' of school development, and that tensions exist between teacher autonomy and collaboration (Fenwick and Kelly, 2023, p. 212).

Despite these tensions and challenges, in educational settings, the concept of connective professionalism and the practice of interprofessional work are also seen as opportunities for the **teaching profession** to maintain and re-install professional status and expertise (Brodén, 2022; McGrath, 2023; Mezza, 2022). Learning from other professions can be inspiring for teaching staff and reflecting on teacher expertise within interprofessional collaboration will help to strengthen the teaching profession.

Areas for implementing CSC relate to **continuing professional learning** and **engagement with research**, both of which play a role in renewing professionalism itself (Mezza, 2022). In this process, the local level is crucial, where teaching staff themselves can be 'at the forefront of innovation', supported by researchers and policy-makers (ibid., p. 4).

The effectiveness of transformative models of professional learning, such as **professional learning communities** in schools and interprofessional collaborative projects, has been broadly demonstrated (for example, Brennan and King, 2021; European Agency, 2020).

Teacher competence development for inclusive education was found to benefit from a collaborative and interprofessional perspective. Adopting an **inclusive, interprofessional perspective**, but valuing the teacher's status and expertise, EASNIE developed a renewed framework for teacher competences for inclusion for all education professionals, including professionals from other sectors working alongside teachers (European Agency, 2022).

IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING SYSTEM-WIDE COLLABORATION FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Developing interprofessional CSC, and the new professionalism this entails among educators and other professionals, appears to happen primarily at the local level. It is supported by effective school leadership and multi-level governance. In decentralised systems, the government's role lies in setting the conditions for effective CSC. These include funding, implementation guidance, promoting and disseminating examples of practice, and monitoring and evaluating impact. The actual implementation happens at the school/local level.

As an example of implementing CSC in schools, Weeks (2022) identified four main problems in school-community partnerships:

- The complexity of schools and school districts
- Different organisational structures in different sectors
- Sustainability
- Culture – dealing with different views of past experiences, future ambitions and missions, relationships, leadership, decision-making, measuring progress, the use of physical spaces, etc.

As such, cross-sector work in inclusive education must be seen as a '**wicked problem**', or a problem whose social complexity means that it has no determinable stopping rule (Conklin, 2006; Tonkinwise, 2015). Wicked problems involve action research and interventions rather than solutions, to increase understanding while making changes. As such, implementing cross-sector work for inclusive education requires **design for transition** or design that 'stays with' a problem (Tonkinwise, 2015).

Focusing on policy strategies at the national/regional level, and underpinned by the notion of connective professionalism, EASNIE selected **three working models** and/or associated **guidelines and tools** for implementing cross-sector work. These all promote a design approach to move forward on the road to inclusion. They are presented in the following sections.

First, this paper presents a theoretical model (Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2015). This was developed based on a review of holistic models of CSC and is supplemented with 'practitioner points'. Next, it presents working models or methods of practice (Brodén, 2022; McGrath, 2023). They are related to education, but they do not explicitly focus on inclusive education, nor on an individual's benefit, support or care. Instead, the selected education implementation models aim to ensure benefits for the collective group of learners and educators.

Each model is briefly presented; further reading on the examples is strongly encouraged for the TCCA work.

1. Understanding implementation planning for cross-sector work

Based on a literature review, Bryson et al. (2015) propose a **framework for designing and implementing CSC**. It considers the conditions and processes to be taken into account when promoting and implementing cross-sector work for inclusion. Figure 3 outlines the proposed framework.

Available options for action are restricted due to the fact that any interpretation of inclusion is situated in general education policy but contradictory policies often exist. As such, it is necessary to analyse the context in which CSC is to be implemented (Magnússon, Göransson and Lindqvist, 2019).

First, the context includes all the **antecedent conditions**: resources, the institutional environment (mandates, window of collaborative opportunity and vulnerability to policy/political change) and the need to address the public issue (sector failure and resources from non-governmental partners to solve the issue). Antecedent conditions matter, as they influence both the initial conditions for driving collaborative processes and structures, and accountabilities and outcomes at the end of the process.

Initial conditions, drivers and linking mechanisms are a second element of the context to consider. These include agreed aims (as written in authoritative texts), recognised interdependence and pre-existing relationships (initial leadership and specific leader characteristics), consequential incentives and the nature of the task (Bryson et al., 2015). From there, collaborative processes and collaborative structures are activated.

Collaborative processes are based on trust and commitment, shared understanding of the problem through communication mechanisms, (internal) legitimacy and formal implementation planning. **Collaboration structures** are characterised by developing norms and rules or practices of engagement, by dynamic and particularistic structures and by **structural** 'ambidexterity', which refers to effectively handling both poles of existing **tensions**.

However, collaborative processes and collaboration structures may suffer from **endemic conflicts and tensions** (power imbalances, vulnerability to exogenous and endogenous shocks, multiple institutional logics, and tensions such as flexibility versus stability, inclusivity versus efficiency, unity versus diversity, and autonomy versus interdependence or self-interest versus collective interest).

As such, they need effective **leadership**, emergent, dynamic and contingent **governance**, technology and **capacity and competencies** as a mediating and strengthening factor.

Finally, the process shows **complex accountabilities** and tangible and intangible outcomes. These appear at multiple levels, with immediate, intermediate and long-term impact, resilience and reassessment learning and public value creation.

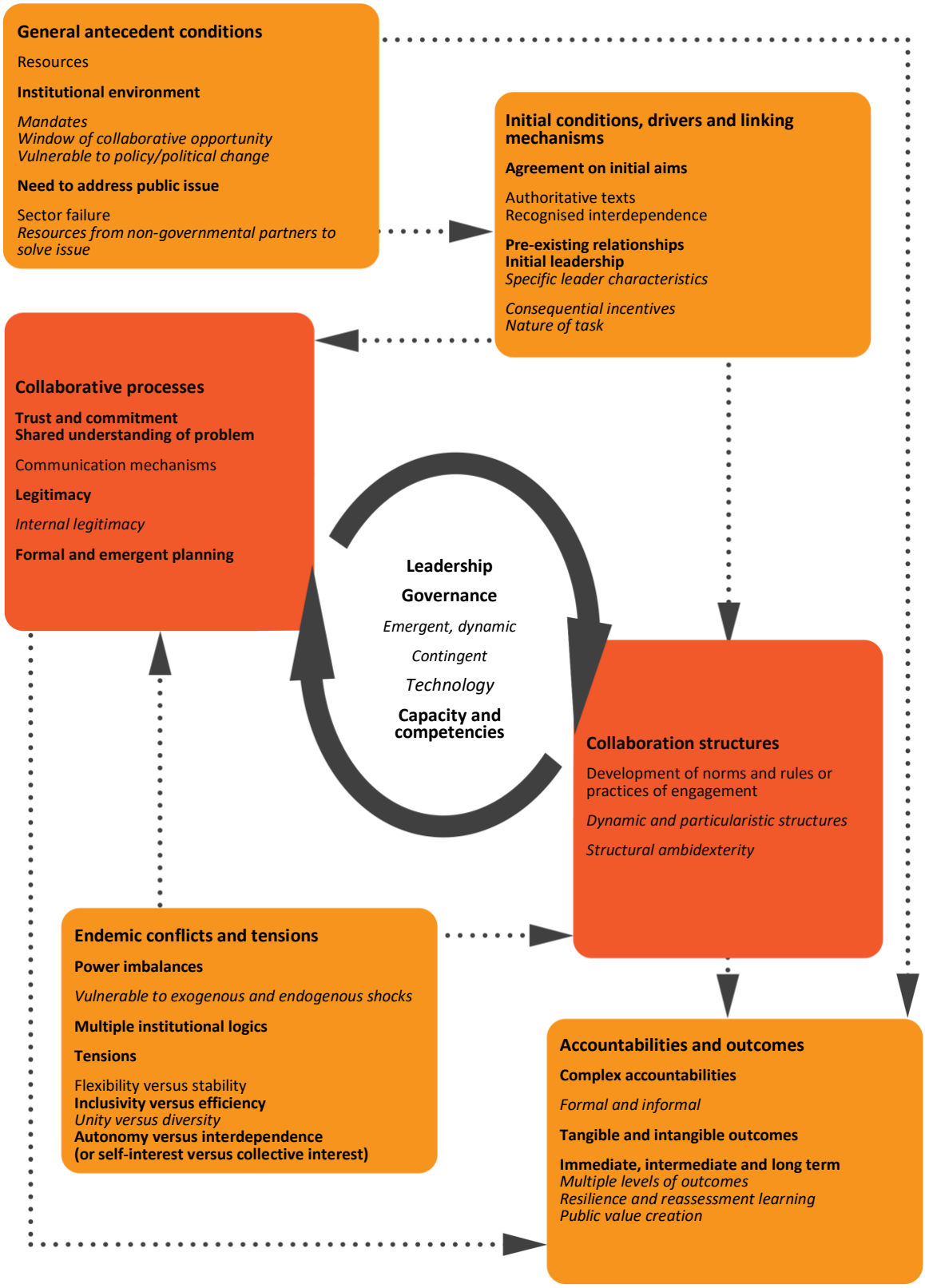


Figure 3. Summary of major theoretical frameworks and findings from empirical studies, 2006–2015 *(adapted from Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2015, p. 651)*. Bolded elements are from both the theoretical frameworks and recent empirical studies; elements in italics are new elements from empirical studies.

The Bryson et al. (2015) framework model provides insight into the many factors to consider when preparing for and promoting cross-sector work in schools. Mapping case study examples into the model can identify a timeline as well as relevant relationships and strategies. Moreover, it can show gaps that may need more consideration through professional learning or guidance at the national level.

Promoting an **inclusive design approach** and **inclusive professional learning** on the topic of CSC, Bryson et al. (2015) conclude that it is challenging but much needed. Hence, they offer the following 'practitioner points':

- Make sure there is a clear collaborative advantage to be gained by collaborating: together, something significant can be gained that would not be achieved alone. Make use of windows of opportunity to advance the collaboration approach.
- View collaborations as complex, dynamic, multilevel systems.
- Collaborating parties should take a design approach to cross-sector collaboration: starting as much as possible with the ends in mind and designing processes, structures, and their interactions in such a way that desired outcomes will be achieved and required accountabilities met. Build ongoing learning into the design, including learning about what goals and performance indicators should be.
- Make sure that committed sponsors, champions, and facilitators are involved throughout.
- Use inclusive processes to develop inclusive structures, which, in turn, will sustain inclusive processes.
- Adopt flexible governance structures that can adjust to different requirements across the life cycle of the collaboration (ibid., p. 647).

2. Getting started with cross-sector work through an iterative 'ambition loop' process

To design or reconsider an implementation plan for CSC for inclusion, McGrath (2023) proposes a **bottom-up iterative approach**, illustrating the abovementioned inclusive design approach.

Figure 4 outlines the ambition loop tool. It shows how the approach moves from ideas specific to one partnership area (level 3) to recognising interconnections across a sector (level 2) and finally, to overarching ideas across sectors (level 1). At level 3, **statements of ambition** are specific to:

- stakeholders such as teachers, learners and parents in the school community (sector 1);

- areas in education such as early childhood and early care, vocational education and training, or higher education, including teacher education (sector 2);
- areas in the broader societal sector such as health and resilience, cultural sector, educational technology and sustainability (sector 3).

Connecting stakeholders and areas within each sector results in different **'ambition loops' or scenarios** at level 2. By imagining different scenarios and asking 'What if …?' about the topics at hand, ambitions can be clearly formulated and discussed.

As a final step, at level 1, overarching ideas to work with as general, shared principles are generated from these different ambition loops. The aim is to agree upon **ambitions relevant for all stakeholders in the school community and wider societal communities** involved.

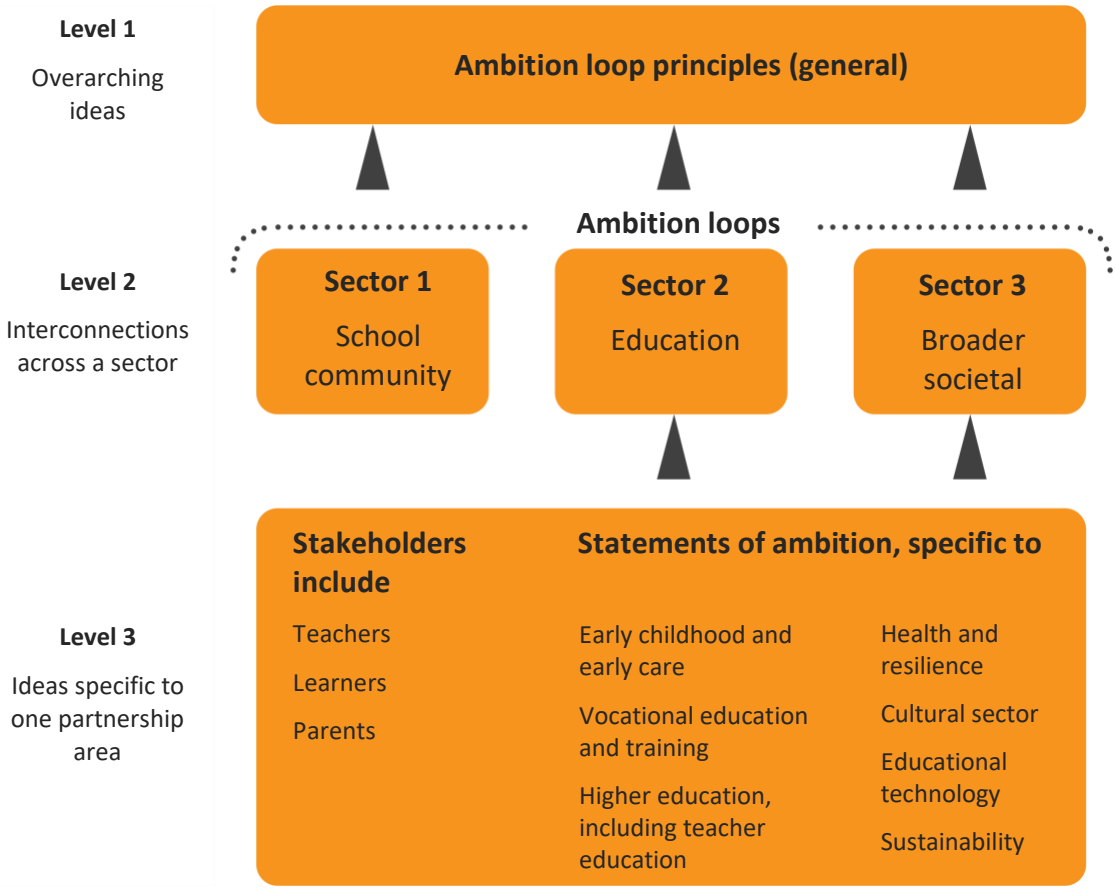


Figure 4. The ambition loop tool framework ***(adapted from McGrath, 2023, p. 22)***

3. Strengthening the teaching profession through interprofessional work

Building on the assumption that interprofessional and cross-sector collaboration has the power to strengthen teaching and the attractiveness of the teaching profession itself, Brodén (2022) proposes a methodology to align policy and implementation of cross-sector work with teachers' needs. The 'personas' tool aims to:

- disclose how different stakeholders respond to different policy choices – for example, how different teachers respond to the introduction of various types of cross-sector and interprofessional collaborations;
- consider how different policies may affect the willingness of each 'persona' to stay in the teaching profession.

Used in design processes, 'personas' are described as:

> … lifelike characters that are driven by potential or real users' personal goals and embody their experiences […]. They are combined patterns of users' behavior and motivations […], synthesized into a set of user archetypes or personas (Huynh et al., 2021, in Brodén, 2022, p. 23).

Based on an analysis of Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 teacher reports and on ideas about intergenerational differences, Brodén developed archetypes of pairs of collaborating teachers. The analysis found that demographic factors, such as gender and age, were not significantly related to deeper forms of collaborative behaviour, but school culture, openness to change and the usefulness of feedback were meaningful.

Informed by the data, 'personas' are put forward as mixed-gender pairs of teachers, differing with regards to job satisfaction, school culture and stress levels. Six archetypes were identified:

- 'Opportunity-seeking confident problem solvers'
- 'Unheard middle-aged seekers'
- 'Time-stressed family builders'
- 'Networked and ambitious collaborators'
- 'Exhausted doubters'
- 'Hyperconnected, well-being centred professionals of the future' (ibid., pp. 25–26).

All of these are fully described to inform policy and to illuminate the implementation of cross-sector work policy. Each of the archetype pairs was used to explore teachers' responses to introducing new policies.

One of the applications of Brodén's 'personas' methodology describes how policy-makers consider teachers' opinions on introducing **teaching assistants** to alleviate the workload

and how it would affect the teachers' decision to stay in the teaching profession. The situation describes how:

- the government provides grants for school education organisers, which are supposed to be used to hire staff to alleviate teachers' administrative, social and disciplinary tasks so they can focus more of their time on teaching;
- a local education authority applies for the grant and mandates its principals to hire this type of staff;
- principals are unprepared for this change and have little time to hire the staff, excluding teachers from the process, but are guided by the local authority on what the teacher assistant should or should not do.

The results show that all but one pair of teacher archetypes – the 'unheard middle-aged seekers' (Brodén, 2022, p. 32) – would not hesitate to stay in the teaching profession. Five pairs of teacher archetypes are expected to be positive about the change in policy and would not leave the profession if teaching assistants were hired.

Similarly, the tool was used to explore how policy-makers should align the introduction of a policy of **community schools** – 'partnerships with organisations outside the school', integrated 'services for children and adults at the school site', and community and partner organisations as 'resources for teaching and learning' (ibid., p. 36) – with the needs of teaching staff. It showed a generally positive attitude towards the new policy, with one pair of teachers giving narrow approval. Other examples, such as primary school teachers working increasingly with early childhood education and care teachers, or teachers working with technological assistants, were applied as a way to explore scenarios for implementing new policies in education.

Using datasets of teachers' reports on their experiences with collaborative work allows for the design of a typology of professionals. This can be used to explore appropriate implementation of cross-sector work for inclusive education and guidelines for designing implementation plans.

Brodén concludes with five guidelines for effective collaboration, based on the different examples applied:

- 'Collaboration needs to be continuously warranted for everyone involved'
- 'Teachers and other stakeholders need to be involved in planning and developing the collaborative effort'
- 'Trust-building leadership is vital'
- 'Clarity facilitates collaboration'
- 'Good interprofessional and cross-sector collaboration needs to be learnt' (ibid., pp. 57–59).

KEY QUESTIONS FOR (LOCAL) POLICY-MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS AT SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY LEVEL

To conclude, building on the findings, concepts and models related to CSC, this paper presents a set of key questions for policy- and decision-makers in inclusive education. The questions are intended to stimulate further discussion and exploration, rather than provide definitive answers. They are outlined and briefly examined as potential starting points for the TCCA clusters' on-going work.

Based on the concepts of a polycentric governance approach, national **inclusive education policy must provide the conditions and support for and ensure the monitoring of local-level interprofessional multi-stakeholder practice**. It must find ways to support and steer co-ordinated networks of integrated multi-service provision and to support the emergence of new connective professionalism.

To sustain the new structures and processes introduced, **it must also allow appropriate quality assurance and accountability measures**. Decentralisation and effective co-ordination at the local level, with collaborative and mutually supportive (non-competitive) school networks, can bring quality issues closer to the stakeholders. However, they also create complex webs of relationships that often rely on 'softer' modes of co-operation between different stakeholders and that can affect policy co-ordination and accountability.

This highlights the need for **targeted support to build capacity for self-review and on-going improvement**, and for monitoring and evaluation by local/regional universities or national research centres. These institutions can share and develop knowledge and help to ensure that innovations are effectively implemented and evaluated, with efficient use of data to ensure continuous improvement.

The model proposed by Bryson et al. (2015) offers a useful framework that identifies main processes and structures and related factors for effective cross-sector work. It gives insight into the complexity of cross-sector work in general. As such, it allows national and local policy-makers to map facilitating factors, gaps and barriers and to identify what is needed to ensure the development and sustainability of effective school networks and multi-service delivery. Above all, it highlights **the role of leadership**, governance, capacity building and competences to deal with all relevant factors.

The leadership and expertise required lie in the capacity to make strategic interventions in specific contexts, to take responsibility for on-going work, to communicate in productive and positive ways and to motivate different stakeholders on the process rather than the 'solution' (Weeks, 2022). In particular, critical leadership roles are needed, which include:

- developing trusting relationships and fostering authentic collaboration;
- facilitating collaboration and managing different stakeholder expectations;
- acting as 'cross-boundary leaders' and increasing cultural understanding among partners;

- developing infrastructure;
- implementing protocols for co-ordination and communication;
- using data effectively for accountability and improvement (Brodén, 2022; Bryson et al., 2015; European Agency, 2024).

In addition, **intermediary actors or bridge organisations may be needed to enhance the capacity and competences for effective cross-sector work** to support principals and co-ordinators in the process and in developing cross-boundary competences themselves.

This raises the following questions for further discussion among policy-makers and practitioners:

- **How can effective monitoring of impact be ensured?** This is a critical question. Without knowing whether mechanisms assumed by new forms of governance work out in practice, what their effect is or for whom, the influence of networks and other CSC remains unclear (Theisens et al., 2016).
- **How is it possible to ensure and/or innovate quality assurance and accountability in schools and school networks that are part of and/or closely co-operate with integrated service delivery?** This question is critical, as stakeholders may not have control over the resources, processes and outcomes that are essential for school improvement (Adams et al., 2017).
- **How can critical leadership roles in CSC be ensured and supported?** Achieving CSC and integrated service delivery requires effective inclusive leadership, at all levels of the system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This background paper has outlined the foundational concepts, governance mechanisms and professional practices necessary for effective CSC in inclusive education systems. These theoretical insights are directly aligned with and enriched by the on-going work within the ACE and CAFIE activities, as part of EASNIE's TCCA.

Drawing on the literature, key trends, topics and elements raised, six pillars have been identified that support the effective implementation of CSC for inclusive education:

- The establishment of collaborative networks within and across various professional areas, recognising the ecosystem needed to develop inclusive education
- New governance and policy alignment across policy areas to support inclusive education
- Connective professionalism and capacity building for inclusion in education
- The use of implementation frameworks and mechanisms to plan for and roll out (new) collaboration
- Boundary-spanning leadership and relationship management within interprofessional networks
- The monitoring of impact and sustainability of established CSC.

Moreover, each of these pillars is important at every level of the ecosystem:

- The national or legislative level
- The regional/provincial level, to support national/regional policy and legislation through supra-local service provision
- The local community and school level.

EASNIE member country representatives and the ACE activity team will further develop, outline and illustrate all of these elements to picture the process of implementing CSC.

The ACE activity provides a platform for understanding how collaborative networks and governance models can be implemented across policy levels. It focuses on strengthening capacity for implementing inclusive education strategies through CSC and providing real-world examples that highlight both successes and barriers in collaboration across sectors. The examples gathered in the ACE work offer strategies for developing connective professionalism and leadership that spans boundaries. The ambition loop framework and the Bryson et al. (2015) model serve as guiding tools in this process, helping policy- and decision-makers to consider more integrated approaches, which include multiple aspects of learner needs.

The CAFIE activity offers a complementary and theoretically-grounded contribution by deepening the understanding of CSC as a systemic feature of inclusive education. It frames CSC not merely as a set of practices, but as a structural and cultural condition for implementing inclusive policy across all levels of the education ecosystem. Drawing on the ecosystem model and informed by international research evidence, CAFIE explores how

vertical and horizontal integration – between ministries, across sectors, and within schools and communities – can be leveraged to address complex, intersectional learner needs. In doing so, it contributes theoretical added value by conceptualising CSC as a dynamic, multi-level process that requires alignment of policy, practice and professional identity.

Together, ACE and CAFIE embody the principles discussed in this paper. They offer a dual lens – theoretical and operational – through which policy-makers can understand and support CSC for inclusive education. The clusters' work demonstrates that CSC is not a peripheral concern, but a central strategy for achieving equity and quality in education.

The ACE and CAFIE publications will follow up on the key elements and key questions raised in this paper, providing policy-makers and practitioners with guidance and reflection to work with and to make meaningful progress in the complexity of inclusive education ecosystems.

As such, the findings and models presented should be considered starting points for further exploration and refinement, not endpoints. They invite policy-makers and practitioners to engage in a continuous cycle of reflection anchored in shared values and collective responsibility for inclusive education.

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