



## Key Principles

Supporting policy development and implementation  
for inclusive education



**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



# KEY PRINCIPLES

**Supporting policy development and  
implementation for inclusive education**



**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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## FOREWORD

This publication from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) is the fourth in the Key Principles series. Highlighting fundamental issues for education systems, the series also reflects the gradual shift that has occurred in the Agency's work over the past 25 years: a shift *away* from a narrow focus on learners' special educational needs and special needs education as specific provision, *towards* extending and improving the quality of support for learning that is generally available to all learners.

The first Key Principles publication was in 2003: [\*Key Principles in Special Needs Education – Recommendations for Policy-Makers\*](#). It made recommendations about including learners with special educational needs within mainstream provision.

The second publication in 2009, *Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education – Recommendations for Policy-Makers*, synthesised the main policy findings from Agency thematic work supporting the inclusion of learners with special educational needs. While this publication still focused on learners with special educational needs, it stressed that the recommendations were also relevant for mainstream education policy-makers. It thus emphasised the concept of widening participation to increase opportunities for all learners.

By 2011, the third publication, *Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education – Recommendations for Practice*, moved beyond policy to summarise key principles for practice as evidenced by Agency thematic projects. These included attention to the learner voice and active participation, teacher attitudes and skills, visionary leadership and coherent inter-disciplinary services – issues which remain relevant in the Agency's work 10 years on.

Now in 2021 – the Agency's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year – the latest Key Principles publication aims to move thinking on even further. It focuses on policy development and implementation in line with a broader view of inclusion. This aligns with the Agency's mission to inform policy development and successful policy implementation at different system levels, most importantly the school level. This focus reflects the Agency's increasing emphasis on being an active agent for policy change in the field of inclusive education.

**Cor Meijer**

**Director of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) conducted an analysis of all its main work since 2011. This exercise identified gaps – areas of work not covered by the Agency to date. It also highlighted areas of alignment across Agency work since 2011 that can be considered as recurring messages about the overall implementation of inclusive education systems.

The Agency has synthesised these recurring messages into key principles to support the implementation of its vision of high-quality education for all learners. The key principles set out the necessary elements for an overall system for inclusive education that positively responds to all dimensions of learner diversity.

The 2021 Key Principles publication aims to support countries that wish to review key policy issues, further develop their inclusive provision in education, and, in particular, bridge the ‘policy-practice’ gap.

It aims to:

- align with the Agency’s position that the ultimate vision for inclusive education is that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015a);
- present evidence-based principles that support dialogue about key questions, raise awareness and further develop thinking and language around inclusive education;
- help decision-makers to consider the dynamic education system as a whole, highlighting the important connections both within and between system levels and organisations and institutions;
- help to assess the potential impact of planned changes towards more inclusive practice;
- provide a basis for a coherent action plan to put policy into practice.





# SUPPORTING POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION IN COUNTRIES

## Challenges and opportunities



The shift to a broader concept of inclusive education requires schools to accommodate differences and overcome various barriers to learning wherever they arise. Developing more inclusive school organisation, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and support over time will improve the quality of education for everyone.

This paradigm shift does present a challenge, however – how to fulfil the rights and meet the needs of some learners (for example, those with disabilities) who require additional support, while working towards equitable education for all. The European Commission (2020) states that:

Educational attainment and achievement should be decoupled from social, economic and cultural status, to ensure that education and training systems boost the abilities of every individual and enable upward social mobility (p. 7).

Policy that aims to include learners with specific needs should be developed as part of the general educational policy process (Norwich, 2019). Crucially, special needs education should be seen as a part of mainstream education that increases schools' capacity to work towards a high-quality inclusive education system which can support the diverse needs of all learners.

This approach further requires a move away from 'formal' assessment and labelling with separate provision for different groups both within and outside inclusive settings. It has implications for funding, requiring greater autonomy for schools and local communities to allocate resources and develop strategies to support all learners as appropriate to their own situations.

The move towards a wider concept of inclusion therefore requires greater flexibility to enable schools and communities to take account of intersectionality – the interconnected nature of all social categorisations, such as:

... gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion and other beliefs and attitudes (UNESCO, 2020, p. 4).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notes that discrimination does not 'fall on a single identity marker' (ibid., p. 1). All aspects of an individual's identity 'intersect to create a whole that is different from the component identities' which influence how the world perceives them (Bešić, 2020, p. 114).



Plans (including monitoring) may focus on certain groups to ensure that provision meets specific learner needs. However, effective structures and processes should be sufficiently flexible to take into account all learners' personal characteristics and abilities.

The move to more inclusive education should also include a change in emphasis over time in the policy approaches taken. There should be an increase in prevention and intervention measures and a decrease in compensatory approaches, which exist for learners who are not fully included in the education policy framework. The European Commission (2020) notes the need to reduce low achievement by building on four pillars:

- monitoring (allowing tracking and targeted action);
- prevention (in particular for groups at risk);
- early intervention (for pupils already showing difficulties);
- compensation (for those who have already had bad results and need a second chance) (p. 14).

There should be a synergy between strategies to ensure that the system provides quality support for all learners.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience of education systems. While it exacerbated inequalities in many areas, it can now provide an opportunity to re-build a more inclusive and equitable system by increasing inclusive capability at all levels of the school system. The Council of the European Union (2021) sums this up:

The COVID-19 pandemic has put unprecedented pressure on the education and training sector and triggered a widespread shift to distance and blended teaching and learning. This shift has brought different challenges and opportunities for education and training systems and communities, unveiling the impact of the digital divide and connectivity gaps within Member States, as well as inequalities among wealth groups and urban-rural settings, while also highlighting the potential of education and training to build resilience and foster sustainable and inclusive growth (p. 4).

## Current priorities



In recent years, the focus of the Agency's work has broadened. In addition, the nature of the support the Agency offers its member countries has changed, with increased attention on supporting policy development and policy implementation.

In 2021, the Agency carried out a survey of its member countries to establish priorities for future Agency work. The most common issues that the countries identified aligned with the gaps identified in the 2020 Agency Analysis Exercise. These include:

- monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation for inclusive education;
- developing strategies for collaborative cross-sector working (including monitoring and evaluation) across all levels and sectors;



- developing multi-level/multi-stakeholder quality assurance and accountability frameworks for inclusive education;
- ensuring the effective translation of national policies to regional, local and school levels;
- developing inclusive education cultures and competences across professions, system levels and sectors.

Regarding monitoring and evaluation, countries noted the need to develop standards and indicators to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of inclusive provision – particularly the impact of additional support and initiatives to target vulnerable groups. Knowing ‘what works well and why’ can inform future plans to promote inclusive practice, increase stakeholder dialogue around implementation and resource allocation and, in the longer term, improve consistency between regions, local areas and schools.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries see a more urgent need to address equity issues – in particular, access to digital learning. They recognise that achievement gaps have increased and will require a greater focus on early intervention and prevention in the longer term, as well as short-term actions. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of learner (and teacher) well-being as an important pre-condition for all learning. Learning is unlikely to take place unless social and emotional needs are met in a safe school climate.

Linked to this is the need to re-consider assessment frameworks to ensure that wider learning is recognised and valued. This would enable monitoring of learners’ progress (and related school performance) in areas that were often regarded as less important than academic progress, but which are now recognised as essential to learning and success, such as mental health and well-being. It is not a coincidence that many of these issues correspond to principles that underpin a resilient and inclusive learner-centred system.

The legacy of COVID-19 is also likely to require a wider range of services (e.g. health and social sectors) to work more closely with the education sector. Success here depends on joint working from ministerial level to regional and local services to ensure support for schools to address these key areas. This approach also emphasises the need for structures and processes that enable policy and practice to transfer effectively between system levels. Greater collaboration between agencies and services and between institutions will also support learner transition between schools/phases of education and entry into further and higher education and the labour market. Transition, particularly to vocational education and training and to employment, for learners with disabilities remains a challenge for many countries.

Regarding equity, many countries have expressed concern about regional differences. Developing strong principles to support monitoring and increase the consistency of practice could address such disparities, in part. Such an approach could bring about more equitable resource allocation to achieve minimum standards of service in each region or local area.

Research suggests that a range of policy issues needs to be considered where national education policies strive to be inclusive (Magnússon, Göransson and Lindqvist, 2019). It is



clear that many of these policy areas are interconnected and cannot be comprehensively examined in isolation.

## Developing tools for policy analysis



In 2015/2016, the Agency developed a framework for Country Policy Review and Analysis ([CPRA](#)) to analyse information about current inclusive education policy in member countries (European Agency, 2018a).

In light of the experience gained through CPRA, country audit work and the development of an Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Education (European Agency, 2016a; 2017a), the Agency developed an [Analysis Framework for Mapping Inclusive Education Policies](#) (European Agency, 2018b) for its work linked to the European Commission Structural Reform Support Programme. This framework draws on Agency work to identify the main components of inclusive education systems, agreed with member countries. It aims to take account of the complexity of the relationship between levels, structures and processes and bring policy and practice together more holistically.

These frameworks have influenced the development of the key principles that the following section sets out.



## 2021 KEY PRINCIPLES

The 2021 Key Principles (in text boxes below) are covered by an [overarching principle](#) around a widely agreed concept of rights-based inclusive education.

The key principles then set out five requirements for the [legislative and policy](#) context, relating to:

1. funding and resource allocation;
2. governance;
3. quality assurance and accountability;
4. teacher professional learning;
5. curriculum and assessment.

They then continue with eight [operational elements](#) (strategies, structures and processes) for inclusive education systems. These relate to:

1. collaboration and communication;
2. participation in inclusive early childhood education;
3. transition;
4. co-operation between schools, parents and the community;
5. data collection;
6. development of specialist provision;
7. school leadership;
8. the learning and teaching environment and learner voice.

Each principle is followed by a short rationale supported by key [references](#).



## The overarching principle

UNESCO (2020) notes that national laws do not always incorporate international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The establishment of a single framework is crucial to ensure that all learners' rights, both to education and within education, are fulfilled. The first, overarching principle highlights this:



**Within legislation and policy, there must be a clear concept of equitable high-quality inclusive education, agreed with stakeholders. This should inform a single legislative and policy framework for all learners, aligned with key international and European-level conventions and communications, as the basis for rights-based practice.**

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) notes that:

... inclusive education requires a mentality shift at societal level, from seeing certain children as a problem to identifying the existing needs and improving the education systems themselves. It is crucial that society at large, decision-makers and all the actors involved in the field of education fully understand the need for this paradigm shift (pp. 20–21).

The development and, in particular, successful implementation of law and policy require extensive dialogue with stakeholders to agree a clear definition of what inclusive education means. A starting point may be the Agency position that:

The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency, 2015a, p. 1).

The United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) describes inclusive education as involving a process:

... to provide all students [...] with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences (p. 4).

The *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4* (UNESCO, 2015) aims to ensure that no-one is left behind. It requires countries to promote, work towards and provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for **all**, as part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



In working towards this vision, countries' legislation and policy must commit to the right of all learners to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and, more recently, in Article 21 of the European Union (EU) Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union, 2012), which prohibits discrimination on any basis. The UNESCO SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee (2018) highlights the importance of all countries ensuring that the right to education is included in domestic legal frameworks and is prominent in policy documents. However, UNESCO (2020) notes that in many countries, international conventions are not an integral part of national laws.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021) notes the importance of children as agents of change and the right of children to realise their full potential. Measures should ensure that economic, social, cultural or personal circumstances do not turn into sources of discrimination, preventing some children from benefitting from a satisfactory learning experience on an equal footing with others (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). The Human Rights Council (2019) goes further, stating that laws and policies should explicitly include a 'no-rejection clause', forbidding the denial of admission into mainstream schools and guaranteeing continuity in education (p. 12).

Crucially, this change in thinking requires a change in language – particularly regarding learners with disabilities. Countries should move away from medical terms that may contribute to learner segregation and which may be associated with lower expectations and reduced opportunities. Increasing all stakeholders' awareness of the full benefits of inclusive education in the longer term – as a basis for a more inclusive society – is also a pre-requisite for securing commitment to and successful implementation of inclusive education.

## The legislative and policy framework



Within the single legislative and policy framework, the following principles set out five key requirements for the legislative and policy framework for inclusive education.



**Flexible mechanisms for funding and resource allocation that support the on-going development of school communities and enable them to increase their capacity to respond to diversity and to support all learners, without a formal diagnosis or label.**

There is no ideal way to fund inclusive education. Countries vary widely in terms of decentralisation, population density and demographic factors, for example, as well as economic, social and cultural contexts and the structure and detail of the education system. Governments need to foster synergies and encourage networks to share resources, facilities and capacity development opportunities (Ebersold, Watkins, Óskarsdóttir and Meijer, 2019). Effective arrangements to fund collaborative work



between different sectors and agencies that support learners and schools can improve both the quality and cost-effectiveness of services (UNESCO, 2020).

Ensuring equal education opportunities for those at risk of exclusion is not just the responsibility of education policy designers. It requires multiple actors working in closely aligned administrative systems to support the many different facets in the lives of vulnerable people. Using one service provider as a referral point for other services or providing multiple services at single sites can reduce duplication and further improve quality, as service professionals communicate and work together (UNESCO, 2020).

Throughout the entire funding and resource allocation system, there must be transparency in planning, with effective monitoring to ensure that funds are used for the intended purpose. This ensures equity and enables all learners to gain the maximum benefit from their education. Currently, gaps frequently exist in clear information and data about resource allocation to special and inclusive settings and spending for both general and specific purposes (European Agency, 2016b).

To include all learners, schools must develop and move from individual needs-based financing to a whole-school approach. This enables universal support for all through flexible, learner-centred, personalised learning. In turn, this should increase schools' capacity to reduce barriers to learning and discriminatory practices by transforming organisation, teaching practices and classroom environments (European Agency, 2018c; OECD, 2016). It should be recognised that individual and compensatory approaches generally lead to higher costs, as more external support and expertise is needed to make up for teachers' lack of preparation for diversity.

Schools' capacity to increase prevention measures can be further improved by flexible funding that provides access to support from the local community (e.g. to increase learner engagement through broader curriculum opportunities and mentoring).

Importantly, funding and resource allocation must be equitable. Mechanisms should ensure attention to learner progress by linking to learner outcomes, rather than only providing for access (e.g. placement in mainstream) and participation in activities without real learning. According to the Agency, equity can encompass:

- equity in access
- equity in distribution of learning opportunities and appropriate support
- equity in achieving opportunities and possibilities for success in academic and social learning and in the transition opportunities
- equity in reaching personal autonomy during and after formal education and the affiliation opportunities open to learners with SEN [special educational needs] that support their inclusion in wider society (European Agency, 2011, p. 56).

Finally, countries should consider that, in the longer term, inclusive education can lead to cost savings. Learners who disengage from or do not experience success at school, for whatever reason, are more likely to require additional services as adults (e.g. income





support, housing, health care) with a high economic and social cost to society (OECD, 2010; 2015). The Agency found that attending a special setting is:

... correlated with poor academic and vocational qualifications, employment in sheltered workshops, financial dependence, fewer opportunities to live independently, and poor social networks after graduation (European Agency, 2018d, p. 11).



**An effective governance plan that sets out clear roles and responsibilities, opportunities for collaboration and levels of autonomy throughout all system levels.**

Burns (2015) notes that effective governance works by building capacity, open dialogue and stakeholder involvement. Governance is a balance between accountability and trust, innovation and risk avoidance, consensus-building and making difficult choices. The central level remains important – even in decentralised systems – to trigger and steer education through a strategic vision, clear guidelines and feedback (European Agency, 2017b). However, the level at which policy is created and decisions are made – and the relationships between these levels – is crucial. Stakeholders must be clear about levels of autonomy and decision-making within their areas of responsibility, and be well prepared for and supported in such developments. Ainscow (2015) points out that policy-makers must recognise that policy details are not amenable to central regulation – and are better dealt with by those who understand local contexts. These local stakeholders should be trusted to act in learners’ best interests and to collaborate for the benefit of all.

Donnelly (2016; European Agency, 2017b) argues that capacity-building to raise the achievements of local communities necessarily involves:

- Leadership that is ‘enabling’ and aims to develop a collaborative culture based on clear vision
- Support for professional development that increases individual and collective capacity to implement high-quality inclusive education
- Innovation implemented with space to learn from experience and mistakes
- Accountability that values wider achievement, not easy measures driven by market-dependent forces
- Targeted funding
- Explicit and clear national values regarding equity and inclusion.

Developing such practice may require significant structural and cultural change in terms of accountability. This could involve local authorities moving away from a ‘command and control’ perspective, towards one of enabling and facilitating collaborative action (Ainscow, Dyson, Hopwood and Thomson, 2016), bearing in mind that inclusive education is a collective responsibility (Ydo, 2020).



Collaborative working at all system levels is essential. This should include work between ministries of education and others such as social and health ministries. There should be similar co-operation between these sectors, agencies, third-sector organisations and schools at local level (European Agency, 2018c).

Finally, governance should ensure a focus on equity. The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2020) note that governance (and funding) that affects equity includes:

- School choice and differentiation of regulatory frameworks
- Academic admission criteria, early tracking and grade repetition
- School autonomy where high levels can lead to differences in quality and affect equity
- Accountability relating to learner competences and outcomes, as well as other measures
- Measures to support disadvantaged schools and low-achieving learners
- Out-of-school activities.



**A comprehensive quality assurance and accountability framework for monitoring, review and evaluation that supports high-quality provision for all learners, with a focus on equitable opportunities for those at risk of marginalisation or exclusion.**

Awareness-raising and dialogue with stakeholders should provide an opportunity to agree on a view of effective practice in inclusive education, challenge underlying assumptions, beliefs and values, identify priorities and evaluate progress (European Agency, 2014a). It can further clarify roles, responsibilities and stakeholder accountability and support the development of indicators that reflect expectations. When systems see learners more holistically, valuing diverse learner outcomes, a more comprehensive set of quality indicators is needed. UNESCO (2017a) notes:

In countries with narrowly conceived criteria for defining success, monitoring mechanisms can impede the development of a more inclusive education system. A well-functioning education system requires policies that focus on the participation and achievement of all learners (p. 21).

In addition to collecting evidence around – or measuring – the skills and competencies needed for learners' success in school and in their future lives, monitoring must include accurate and reliable information on resources and on other inputs, structures and processes that ultimately impact on learning. Such measures are particularly important in relation to the experiences of minority groups and those potentially vulnerable to underachievement, to support equitable practice. Quality standards and indicators can help schools to embed quality assurance in their policies and to act as learning organisations aiming to constantly improve their practices (Ebersold and Meijer, 2016).



Indicators for inclusion in and around schools can also stress that the learner is at the centre of a series of systems that work together to shape their development (European Agency, 2016a; 2017a). This, in turn, can support consistency and align actions in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation across school, local community, regional and national levels. In particular, evidence from the evaluation process can serve to strengthen organisational learning and involvement and stakeholder development at all levels.

Indicators can support the understanding of policy, strategy and implementation and show how well a system promotes progressive change (Downes, 2014a; 2014b). Significantly, structural indicators can provide an overarching national framework of key issues to address (Downes, 2015). This helps to identify enabling conditions for success while respecting stakeholders' professional judgments and avoiding top-down prescription.

Above all, stakeholders should be involved in the accountability system, as ownership can support collaborative professional development, reflection and on-going improvement within and across schools.



**A continuum of teacher professional learning – initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development for teachers and teacher educators – that develops areas of competence in all teachers regarding assessment and needs identification, curriculum planning (universal design), inclusive pedagogy, engagement with and in research and use of evidence.**

The Council of the European Union (2021) stresses the need for a professional continuum to:

... systematically cover learning opportunities related to work in multilingual and multicultural environments, work with learners with special needs and disadvantaged backgrounds, digital pedagogies, sustainable development and healthy lifestyle (p. 5).

The Council also recognises the need for professional autonomy to meet a range of challenges. These include supporting the holistic development of learners with more diverse learning needs and the need for constructive and mutually supportive relationships with other stakeholders.

Agency work also highlights the need for clear and coherent links between initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development to form a continuum of teacher professional learning (including both formal and non-formal learning opportunities) (European Agency, 2015b). Fragmented initiatives are inadequate to prepare all teachers to include all learners more systematically. They also reduce variability in the effectiveness of teachers, which impacts on learning (European Agency, 2019a).



Improving teacher professional learning requires the development of teacher educators. They should have knowledge and experience in inclusive education, as well as experience in schools, to enable them to develop competences in others.

In addition to the core values and areas of competence outlined in the *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* (European Agency, 2012), the following specific areas are needed to support inclusive practice:

- Knowledge and understanding of the functions of assessment and the use of information to improve learning, provide support to overcome barriers and to monitor and evaluate teaching approaches. It can also be used to report to parents and other stakeholders and judge overall school performance.
- The ability to work with others to plan a relevant curriculum that gives all learners opportunities to fulfil their potential.
- Skills to use a range of evidence-based teaching strategies to provide personalised support to all learners. This support should enable learners to access learning materials and resources, process information and demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways.



**A single curriculum framework that is sufficiently flexible to provide relevant opportunities for all learners, and an assessment framework that recognises and validates attainment and wider achievement.**

A flexible curriculum framework must be developed to provide a basis for planning relevant learning opportunities for **all** learners, without separate curricula which may limit expectations and opportunities for some vulnerable groups.

UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2019) defines an inclusive curriculum as one that:

... takes into consideration and caters for the diverse needs, previous experiences, interests and personal characteristics of all learners. It attempts to ensure that all students are part of the shared learning experiences of the classroom and that equal opportunities are provided regardless of learner differences.

However, as UNESCO (2020) points out, this definition draws attention to several challenges. First, there are political tensions regarding the kind of society people aspire to achieve through education. Second, there are practical challenges in ensuring flexibility to serve diverse contexts and needs without segregating learners. Third, there are technical challenges in ensuring the curriculum serves equity by being relevant and creating bridges to ensure that no learner is cut off.



Alves, Pinto and Pinto (2020) conclude:

If schools are encouraged to be inclusive, but there is a prescriptive curriculum that does not allow teachers to adapt contents, pedagogical approaches, or assessment to different student characteristics and needs, then the resulting paradox can prevent genuine inclusiveness (p. 282).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the need for flexible approaches, in particular blended and e-learning, to manage learners with a range of needs and interests. These learners may require a variety of adjustments in terms of pace, presentation, content, ways of responding, etc.

Closely linked to the curriculum, countries should develop an inclusive assessment framework that can identify and value all learners' progress and achievement. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) states that:

Standardised assessments must be replaced by flexible and multiple forms of assessments and recognition of individual progress towards broad goals that provide alternative routes for learning (p. 9).

Assessment should primarily support learning. It should cover the full range of learning outcomes (i.e. academic and wider areas of learning) through the curriculum and informal, non-formal and extra-curricular activities. Here, assessment information can be used to adjust the curriculum and teaching approaches, identifying and overcoming barriers to learning and informing support decisions.

When teachers identify barriers to learning through their on-going assessment, they should collaborate with specialists to further examine both the learner's characteristics and the environmental variables.

Assessment may be linked to eligibility for additional resources or services (e.g. input from specialist teachers for learners with visual impairment). However, it should not lead to labelling, withdrawal or separate provision. Support should be provided based on learner support needs without requiring formal certification which can lead to strategic behaviour.

Periodic summative assessment can support on-going assessment. It can be used for reporting, certifying progress and achievement, allocating resources and grouping learners for data analysis. However, the role of high-stakes assessment should be clear to avoid unintended consequences such as teaching to tests and possibly narrowing the curriculum. Achievement goes beyond academic attainment (e.g. as measured on standardised tests) and should consider 'critical thinking, collaborative skills, creativity, independence and problem-solving ability' (European Agency, 2017c, p. 19). As noted above, assessment frameworks should ensure that areas that were formerly seen as less important than academic progress, such as social and emotional well-being, are recognised as essential to learning and success.

Alves et al. (2020) suggest that using assessment information requires critical reflection on the meaning of success as 'notions of achievement are related to the curriculum, and to what types and forms of knowledge are valued' (p. 282).



Finally, assessment information can inform the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum, teaching approaches, support strategies, learner groupings, resource allocation and other aspects of school organisation.

## The operational elements for inclusive education systems



The following principles relate to eight operational strategies, structures and processes considered essential for inclusive policy and practice.



**Structures and processes to enable collaboration and effective communication at all levels – between ministries, regional- and local-level decision-makers and between services and disciplines, including non-governmental organisations and schools.**

Education policy is taking shape in increasingly complex environments, with education systems moving from top-down structures to more horizontal interactions between multiple stakeholders (Viennet and Pont, 2017). This leads to changes in approaches to policy implementation, with more negotiation and involvement of teachers, school leaders, learners, local and regional education policy-makers, among others (OECD, 2020).

Communication is clearly an important channel for both conveying messages and gathering feedback. It is also vital for building agreement between stakeholders, gaining public support, and fostering policy ownership (OECD, 2020).

UNESCO (2017a) emphasises the need for leaders at all levels to establish the conditions for challenging non-inclusive, discriminatory and inequitable educational practices. This allows them to ‘build consensus and commitment towards putting the universal values of inclusion and equity into practice’ (p. 26).

At local level, the Agency notes that a collaborative learning community is the key to raising achievement. School improvement should be driven by the whole school community’s commitment to finding better ways for everybody to live, work and learn together. It involves creating partnerships, collaborating and engaging in shared activities to bring about sustainable development (European Agency, 2018e).



**A strategy to increase participation in quality inclusive early childhood education and support families experiencing disadvantage.**

Research shows that there are clear benefits for children who participate in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in terms of their overall development and, more specifically, their academic performance. This finding is especially valid for disadvantaged learners (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020), as it improves their social



inclusion and long-term life chances. However, investing in such provision is only worthwhile if services are of high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive (Council of the European Union, 2019). The provision also needs to be ‘part of an integrated child-rights based package of policy measures to improve outcomes for children and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage’ (ibid., p. 1).

Regarding family support, ECEC services are often the first personal contact with parents. As such, they can form a good basis for an integrated approach to services, such as counselling for parents experiencing difficulties.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Parliament, Council of the European Union, European Commission, 2017) sets out a number of key principles to benchmark social policy. These include Principle 11 on childcare and support to children. Principle 11 acknowledges the importance of ECEC for better child outcomes in later life, the right to affordable education and good quality care, and every child’s right to protection from poverty. It also includes the right of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to ‘specific measures to enhance equal opportunities’ to ensure their access to adequate social support and life opportunities (ibid., p. 19). Pillar 9 stresses the right to a positive work-life balance for ‘parents and people with caring responsibilities’, including ‘suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services’ (ibid., p 16).

Participation in ECEC across the EU has increased in recent years due to a combination of factors. These include investment in increasing childcare places, wider information-sharing about available provision, making ECEC provision more affordable and, in some cases, making participation in ECEC mandatory.



**A strategy to support all learners at times of transition between phases of education – and particularly as they move into adult life – through vocational education and training, further and higher education, independent living and employment.**

Transition between education levels requires co-ordination to ensure that delivery of education continues smoothly. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds face added challenges in the transition from early childhood education into school. In such cases, countries may respond with language support and financial measures to support participation (UNESCO, 2020). However, the transition between secondary and post-secondary education and integration into society is often more difficult (Moriña, 2017).

The Agency noted poor transition to adulthood as one definition of school failure. It suggested that influential factors at school level include school organisation and practices such as promoting a growth mindset to challenge low self-belief and self-esteem, eliminating barriers to learning, and approaches to increase motivation and engagement (European Agency, 2019b).

Research suggests that assigning learners – especially at an early age – into lower-level vocational tracks can both increase educational inequalities and negatively influence educational attainment levels. It prevents some learners from progressing to tertiary





education without obtaining additional qualifications (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

The European Commission (2017a) suggests that countries should develop different educational routes to certification and promote flexible learning pathways. This will provide all learners with the opportunity to achieve recognised qualifications, find meaningful employability and fulfil personal development. It is also beneficial if there is permeability between different tracks (for example, academic and vocational) to provide more flexibility and facilitate learner choice.

Finally, the Agency found that high-quality transition programmes in secondary schools may increase the likelihood of people with disabilities finding employment – particularly if these programmes are community-based (European Agency, 2018d). Being educated in an inclusive education setting can also influence the type of employment people with disabilities can access. Learners have opportunities to gain more academic and vocational qualifications, with the likelihood of wider employment opportunities.



**Structures and processes to facilitate co-operation between schools, parents and members of the community to support inclusive school development and enhance learner progress.**

Family involvement in the education process is crucial. However, as UNESCO (2017a) notes, parents may lack confidence and it may be necessary to work to develop their capacity and build networks.

UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2016) highlights some key points to consider when working with families:

- Families and communities have the right to involvement and can make a range of contributions. In particular, they have knowledge of their children which professionals do not have.
- Building family and community involvement is a step-by-step process based on trust. Exceptional efforts are needed to promote the involvement of marginalized groups.
- Families and community groups can sometimes take a lead role as activists for inclusive education.
- Families' rights to involvement can be built into legislation or into the system of school governance.
- Communities can also be involved successfully in the governance of schools or of the education system as a whole.





- Schools can act as a resource for the community by offering services or becoming the base for other agencies (p. 32).

Beyond the family, co-operation with the local community helps schools to enrich learning experiences and outcomes and better support young people to develop the competences they need. This may include co-operation with local services, community organisations, businesses, other schools, colleges and universities (European Commission, 2017b). Establishing partnerships with other professionals (e.g. health, social care, third-sector organisations) can further support capacity building and extend the skills of school communities to meet a wider range of diverse needs, while enhancing the curriculum and improving the quality of provision for all learners.



**A system for data/information collection that:**

- **provides feedback to inform on-going improvement across the whole system (e.g. monitoring access to formal and informal education, participation, learning and accreditation);**
- **supports decision-makers at all levels to identify ‘signals’ that indicate the need for urgent action regarding schools needing additional support.**

From a policy perspective, access to valid and reliable data as an evidence base to develop inclusive educational policy at the regional, national and international level is essential (European Agency, 2014b).

In stressing the need for a renewed focus on monitoring with an equity lens, Sustainable Development Goal 4 notes that data should be reliable, timely and disaggregated. This focus on equity also requires greater capacity to analyse data on participation and learning outcomes at all levels (UNESCO, 2017b). Further, presenting data in an accessible and user-friendly way enhances its use by all stakeholders, working towards on-going improvement.

The Agency notes that access to any form of education is an equity issue acting as a pre-requisite for all other issues (European Agency, 2020). The Agency provides agreed definitions to support the collection of data on learners who are out of any form of recognised education, extending beyond the school. Its report (ibid.) also recognises that some learners will be invisible – not identified by any data or monitoring systems and not represented in any database. It stresses that, while the numbers of these learners may be very small, countries should acknowledge that they do exist and consider different forms of data collection to make them more visible.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020) sets out two key purposes for data collection in relation to inclusion:

First, data can highlight gaps in education opportunities and outcomes among learner groups. They can identify those at risk of being left behind and the barriers to inclusion. Second, with data on who is being left behind and why,



governments can develop evidence-based policies and monitor their implementation (p. 65).

An important challenge in this area of work is that, while data collection related to inclusion must focus on the rights of the whole learner population, data from the system level needs to specifically look into those groups of learners who might be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement (Ainscow et al., 2016).

While statistical information may be available on areas such as learner attendance, behaviour and progress, increasingly systems are developing to track learners and provide information on the value added by the school. While qualitative information can be gathered from stakeholder surveys, etc., Ainscow et al. state that:

... statistical information alone tells us very little. What brings such data to life is when 'insiders' start to scrutinise and ask questions together as to their significance, bringing their detailed experiences and knowledge to bear on the process of interpretation (ibid., p. 29).

Crucially, data should reflect a broad view of education and go beyond measuring outcomes for the purpose of comparison, to measure what is really valued in inclusive education at school, local, regional, national and even international levels.



**A strategy to develop specialist provision to support all learners and increase the capacity of mainstream schools, detailing cross-sectoral working and professional development for all staff.**

Within the commitment to inclusive education, leaders need to be clear how the expertise and resources from specialist provision can support the move to a more inclusive system while still ensuring quality support for learners from potentially vulnerable groups.

Considering this dilemma, UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2016) notes that it is useful to consider the distinction between needs, rights and opportunities:

All children have needs (e.g. for appropriate teaching), but they also have the right to participate fully in a common social institution (a local mainstream school) that offers a range of opportunities for them. Too often parents are forced to choose between ensuring that their child's needs are met (which sometimes implies special school placement) and ensuring that they have the same rights and opportunities as other children (which, according to the Salamanca Statement, implies mainstream school placement) (p. 35).

It stresses that the aim should be to create a system where these choices are no longer necessary.



During the period of transition, specialist provision can play an important role by transforming into resource centres to support mainstream schools (UNESCO, 2017a). Such centres should support schools to:

- develop their capacity to meet more diverse learner needs;
- develop the competences of local and school leaders as well as teachers to strengthen collaboration with other professionals, to ensure high-quality support for all learners.



**A strategy to develop and support school leaders who work with others to create an inclusive and equitable school ethos with strong relationships, high expectations, proactive and preventative approaches, flexible organisation and a continuum of support to intervene when learners are at risk of failure and exclusion.**

Effective school leadership positively impacts learner achievement, teaching quality and staff motivation (European Commission, 2017b). The Agency suggests that leaders:

... take responsibility for and value all learners. They work to ensure learners' full participation and engagement by setting a clear direction, developing staff and other stakeholders and using all available evidence, experience and expertise to collaboratively create and sustain the learning community and support everyone to achieve the best possible outcomes (European Agency, 2019c, p. 10).

Further, it stresses school leaders' role in addressing inequity and building community in a culture where diversity is valued.

Working towards system improvement, leaders can create opportunities for school staff to:

- take on additional roles to classroom teaching (e.g. co-ordinating or leadership roles; supporting colleagues, including mentoring, professional development, involvement in school development) and work at other system levels (e.g. project work, extra-curricular activities, co-operation with external partners);
- become involved in developing the education system (e.g. school evaluation, policy dialogue, policy development);
- engage in school-to-school networks to share expertise and teaching resources, spread innovation or support school development (European Commission, 2018).

The Agency summarises the key actions needed to raise learner achievement (European Agency, 2018e):

- **Create a raising achievement culture.** This demands that leaders develop an inclusive school ethos, with positive relationships and a focus on learner well-



being. Staff and other stakeholders engage with research and maintain high expectations for all learners.

- **Lift limits on learning.** This requires leaders to collaboratively develop an authentic curriculum that supports all learners' access to meaningful learning opportunities through inclusive pedagogy and use of assessment primarily for learning.
- **Develop a system of mutual support.** This action recognises leaders' important role in enabling support, for learners but also for teachers, to allow everyone to make progress within the learning community. Leaders also recognise their own support needs and ensure these are met, e.g. through networking and collaborative professional development.
- **Nurture all learners.** Here, listening to learners is seen as crucial. Leaders encourage teachers and others to respond in ways that encourage the development of a growth mindset to support achievement.
- **Share leadership.** Leaders working at different system levels – school, local, regional and national – engage all stakeholders in developing an inclusive vision and secure commitment from colleagues and from the wider community around the school.
- **Focus on what matters.** Schools monitor learner progress, participation and engagement, and evaluate policy and practice. Leaders ensure that information is used to further improve, putting learners at the centre.
- **Achieve more together.** Leaders are central to collaboration with colleagues and specialists in school, and to co-operation with other schools, organisations and support services. They recognise the important role of families and other members of the local community in inclusive school development.



**A guidance framework to develop learning and teaching environments where learners' voices are heard and their rights fulfilled through personalised approaches to learning and support.**

The European Commission (2017a) sets out an aspiration for teaching and learning environments. It suggests that member states should:

... encourage approaches that support learners in education and training, including through gathering student feedback on their learning experiences, together with inclusivity and equity provisions that try to compensate for different starting positions, i.e. provisions that go beyond equality of opportunity, to ensure inclusion in diversity and progress towards equity (p. 2).

When learners are listened to and given some influence in their own lives, teachers and learners become co-creators in the teaching and learning process. Learners, teachers,



parents and communities work together to support progress towards shared goals (OECD, 2019).

Crucially, personalised learning and support cannot be achieved by importing special educational thinking and practice (for example, individualised or segregated group responses) into mainstream settings (UNESCO, 2017a). Schools need to move away from the idea of responding to difficulties ‘within’ the child and trying to fit learners into the existing system. Instead, they should focus on changing school structures and processes.

Personalised learning extends what is available to everyone in the class, applying the principles of universal design for learning to consider all learners and take account of the learning and teaching environment. Rather than planning for most of the class and then differentiating for some, teachers should have a range of strategies to use flexibly so that learners do not need to struggle or fail before they can access support.

Learners with more complex support needs may need additional resources and input from specialists. However, the most important form of support can be provided from resources which are available to every school – that is, learners supporting learners, teachers supporting teachers, parents as partners in their children’s education, and communities as supporters of schools and other centres of learning (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2016).



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Effective educational change requires the recognition that implementation is as important as the policy design itself. It is a key aspect in policies successfully reaching schools and classrooms (OECD, 2020).

The evidence-based key principles presented in this report therefore focus on both policy development and implementation and align with Agency member countries' priorities. It is clear that education systems vary across countries. They are dynamic, multi-level systems with additional complexity that arises from cultural, social, religious and other contextual differences (for example, differences in centralised or more de-centralised governance structures). Therefore, as Loreman, Forlin and Sharma (2014) point out, there are no 'quick fixes' regarding internationally-relevant indicators. In the longer term, countries could potentially use the key principles set out in this document to develop such indicators. These could inform the collection and interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data within a quality assurance and accountability framework relevant to the countries' own contexts.

If all the above components are present, then all levels of the education system should work together to become more equitable, effective and efficient in valuing learner diversity and raising the achievement of **all** learners and system stakeholders.



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