



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE QUALITY EDUCATION IN FINLAND AND IRELAND

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Findings report on the legislative frameworks of inclusive provision of Finland and Ireland – Executive Summary

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS OF FINLAND AND IRELAND – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is an Executive Summary of the Deliverable 2.3 ‘Findings report on the legislative frameworks of inclusive provision of Finland and Ireland’, which is part of the TSI project ‘Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland’. This multi-country project is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) and is implemented with the support from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) in co-operation with the Directorate General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) of the European Commission. The project aims to help the two participating countries, Finland and Ireland, identify key objectives and plan actions for promoting equitable learning opportunities, improving educational outcomes and increasing access to mainstream education for all learners. With a particular focus on promoting quality inclusive education, the project aims to increase the two countries’ capacity to design and implement inclusive provision in mainstream education settings.

The executive summary consists of five sections. It begins with an [introduction](#) that sets the stage for the [analysis](#). It then examines the legislative frameworks for the project countries, highlighting their [strengths and challenges](#). Following this, the summary identified the [common issues and areas for development](#) across the two countries. Finally, it concludes with [closing remarks](#) that summarise the key findings and insights from the legislative frameworks report.

Introduction

The report on the legislative frameworks of Finland and Ireland is one of the key deliverables of the project. It aims to provide background on the legislative information and policy priorities, exploring their implications for inclusive policy development. Produced by a team of Country Analysts from the Agency, the report was supported by the project’s Steering Committee (SC), and Research Advisor, Professor Lani Florian.

The report analyses the current legislative and policy framework of inclusive education in Finland and Ireland (at legal, institutional and governance levels), with a particular focus on the two countries’ national priorities and recommendations that support inclusive provision in mainstream settings. The main findings of the report will guide SC members in directing future project activities, using them as the basis for content-related discussions in the national consultations.

To analyse the current legislative and policy framework the Agency’s team reviewed key policy documents and the state of play of the compulsory education system in both countries. The desk review process consisted of the following steps:

Compiling an initial list of resources for analysis: The initial list of resources included:

- The Agency Country System Mapping ([CSM](#)) reports of Finland and Ireland, produced by the Agency.



- Government policy documents and guidance from different bodies of the two contexts.
- Other reports arising from the countries' recent participation in the Agency's activities.
- Targeted publications from the EU and international bodies referring to both countries' educational systems (e.g. European Commission, Eurydice, CEDEFOP, UN, OECD, etc.).

Agreeing on the final resource list for each country with the SC members: Each country reviewed and provided additional national resources for analysis with the cut-off being 2015. Where earlier policies are still in place, these were also included. Additional literature, including key academic articles, was also identified by following up citations from reviewed sources and published reference lists (see References of the Deliverable 2.3).

Developing the review's analytical framework: The Agency team adjusted the Country Policy Development and Support ([CPDS](#)) framework which is based on the Agency's [Key Principles](#). The final framework consisted of 14 components considered to be necessary elements for a comprehensive system for inclusive education (one overarching principle around a widely agreed concept of rights-based inclusive education, five requirements for the legislative and policy context, and eight operational strategies, structures and processes for inclusive education systems).

Drafting, reviewing and finalising the report: The Agency team presented some key emerging findings for stakeholder validation during the project's kick-off meeting with stakeholders in Dublin, Ireland. The draft report was reviewed by the Research Advisor and SC members, with final comments incorporated after an online SC meeting in April 2024.

Analysis of project countries' legislative framework

The analysis of the legislative information and policy priorities of Finland and Ireland presented in Deliverable 2.3 provides a snapshot of each country's adherence to the key principles of inclusive education. This section briefly presents a summary of each country's snapshot.

Finland

The *legislation and policies* of Finland cover a range of issues that are linked to inclusive education. A particular focus is given to the three-tier support system which provides general support for all learners, intensified support and special support. Finland signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol in 2016.

In relation to *funding and resource allocation*, the documents reviewed suggest that a significant part of education is publicly funded, and the settings in all levels of education are maintained by local authorities, mainly municipalities, or joint municipal authorities. The government provides funding to universities and universities of applied science. A



positive discrimination funding policy is in place to benefit children and families at risk of exclusion.

Governance is based on the principle of decentralisation, and it is organised at different levels. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for publicly funded education and policy development. The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for the development of the national core curricula and requirements of qualifications for all levels of education. Local administration is managed by local authorities. It is comprised of municipalities or joint municipal authorities. Finland demonstrates a high level of autonomy, and this applies to education providers, schools and teachers.

Self-evaluation, carried out by the education providers themselves, is the most important *quality assurance* mechanism. A sample-based assessment approach is carried out at national level, according to an assessment plan. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is responsible for carrying out national evaluations at all levels of education.

In relation to *teacher professional learning*, Finland expects general and special teachers to have qualifications relevant to the level of education they are appointed to, but there is a flexibility in the number of ECTS that are specific to each education level. Teachers are expected to participate in compulsory and voluntary continuing professional development activities. The recently revised Teacher Education Development Programme covers teachers' core education and induction as well as career-long professional and continuous learning.

The *curriculum and assessment framework* for the different levels of education are developed by the Finnish National Agency for Education. The national curriculum leaves room for local variations, and thus, municipalities and schools have the flexibility to design their own curricula. Learners have the right to preventative community-based welfare that supports the entire community of educational institutions, and to individual learner welfare, i.e. health care, learner welfare psychologist, and school social worker services, as well as multi-disciplinary individual learner welfare services. Support for all learners to access the curriculum is provided, and individualised support may take place in special settings.

Finland has established some forums and networks that promote *collaboration and communication*, such as the National Forum for Skills Anticipation, the Teacher Education Forum, and the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (known as ELY Centres).

Participation in *early childhood education and care* (ECEC) is considered a right for all children aged 0–6 years. Access to ECEC is dependent upon fees, and therefore the state supports families to this end. Compulsory education begins in the year when the child turns 7 and for children with disabilities compulsory education may start one year earlier than the statutory minimum, at the age of 6. Support for individual children in mainstream ECEC may entail specialist support in special groups, whereas specialist provision in special kindergartens is also considered a form of support.

Support for transitions is stated in the stage of transition from home to ECEC and from ECEC to primary education. Compulsory-level schools are obligated to share information during school transition phases and when progressing to the secondary level. Finland



developed a transition programme for learners who do not have a secondary school qualification or need preparatory education for other reasons. Learners who are entitled to special needs education support are supported in transitions by guidance counsellors who may help them to plan their future, which may include further studies.

The description of the three-tier system of support points out that *co-operation between school-level stakeholders* is essential in the different tiers of support.

Finland has mechanisms for *data collection* which inform policy developments, such as statistics of support for learners receiving intensified or special support, learners' well-being, health and schoolwork, etc. Reporting portals include Vipunen and VARDA. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) covers the entire education system from early childhood education and care to higher education.

Specialist and segregating structures exist in Finland and *transforming specialist provision* is partly demonstrated by Valteri network.

The documents reviewed did not identify any priorities on *inclusive school leadership*.

Learner and family participation is achieved through the collaboration between teachers, learners and parents, and – where needed – the welfare personnel.

Ireland

Legislation and policies in Ireland are indicative of the government's desire to assert the rights of children with SEN to an education that is appropriate to their needs. Among others, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs. Several policies ensure support for learners who are vulnerable to exclusion from education, including the Continuum of Educational Provision, the Special Education Teaching Allocation Model (SETAM), the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

Funding and resource allocation for access to special schools and special classes is based on a diagnosis of special educational needs (SEN). This development is counterproductive to Ireland's goal of achieving a more inclusive school system. Recent policy initiatives linked to funding for inclusion entail SETAM, a model guiding schools in their provision of teaching support, and the School Inclusion Model (SIM), which is based on the principle of providing the right support at the right time, delivered by a range of personnel with relevant qualifications and skillsets.

The Irish *governance* system is defined as partnership between the state and various private agencies. School-level governance in Ireland has developed a greater diversity of ethos. Different documents are in place which clarify roles and responsibilities of a range of institutions and organisations, most importantly the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education. Other bodies are also linked with governance, such as the Irish Teaching Council.

In relation to *quality assurance and accountability*, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education has an advisory role in relation to the Department of Education and the Minister. It also provides advice and affirmation for teachers, school leaders and management, promotes school self-evaluation and works extensively on evaluation. The



Looking at our School 2022 quality framework for primary and special schools as well as the quality framework for post-primary schools are the basis for self-evaluation.

Teacher professional learning is linked with the Teaching Council which mandates entry standards to the profession, commissions research, accredits initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, etc. Also, the National Disability and Inclusion Strategy (2017–2021) focused on a continuum of teacher professional learning.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has a key role in defining the *curriculum and assessment framework*. It has developed Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Learners with General Learning Disabilities for supporting teachers in mediating the curriculum for learners with SEN. Mainstream schools are expected to fully explore potential supports and tools, including the learner’s response to intervention, prior to the placement of the learner in a special class or school.

There is *collaboration and communication* between state and various private agencies with the responsibility for monitoring, evaluation, quality assurance and accountability being allocated across government departments and agencies. A more consultative and collaborative approach has been promoted with the Department of Education (DoE) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) having a key role in facilitating a more centralised functioning of the Irish education system. The SIM model also acknowledges that inter-departmental and inter-agency collaboration are required to support the development of an inclusive education system.

The area of *early childhood education and family support* has received growing attention in the education system in the last few years. There is progress in establishing high quality early learning and care (ELC) provision with particularly rapid increase in investment and policy development in the last 10 years. Among recent policy strategies are the National strategy ‘First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028’, and ‘Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) 2022–2028’.

In relation to *support for transitions*, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities in 2015–2024 supports transition processes. Following that, the National Disability and Inclusion Strategy (2017–2021) includes transition supports into, within and out of education. Both strategies are indicative of government commitment to support all learners at times of transition between phases of education into adult life. Other policies are also in place to support transitions at different levels.

Another key area for inclusion is *co-operation between school-level stakeholders*. A partnership approach that considers the perspectives and contributions of the multiple education stakeholders, including parents and learners, is consistently adopted across the system. An example of this approach is the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) which was established in 2014 on a partnership basis between the Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN)/the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and the Department of Education.

Data collection is part of the responsibilities of the Department of Education. It maintains and shares data in relation to special education provision. The official Department approach to dealing with SEN in primary and post-primary schools is the Continuum of Support, which enables schools to gather and analyse data as well as plan and review the



progress of all learners and respond to their needs. In the context of data collection and system evaluation with the aim of improvement, programme evaluations took place both in primary and in post-primary schools. The programmes were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes such as the Junior Certificate School Programme, the Transition Year programme, Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. Programme evaluations examine the quality of programme organisation and co-ordination in the school, the quality of programme planning, the quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of the school’s evaluation and assessment.

Regarding the element of *transforming specialist provision*, some steps have been taken, but 2–3% of the school-going population in 2022 are still educated separately in special classes or special schools. Since 2017, mainstream schools were given the flexibility to allocate their special education teaching hours based on the identified learning needs rather than on a disability category through use of the [Continuum of Support](#) approach. Where deemed necessary, schools are provided with special needs assistant (SNA) support to assist with the inclusion of learners with SEN. Additionally, since 2017 the Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation model supports more inclusive learning environments for learners with SEN.

Developing *inclusive school leadership* is an area under development. The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) plays a key role in this area, and the Leadership for INCLUSION in the Early Years (LINC) Programme impacts positively on the provision of inclusive experiences for children in the early years. This is because the CSL has been subsumed into Oide – the new teacher professional support service.

Finally, learner and family participation are promoted by different bodies (e.g. the National Council for Special Education). Stakeholder consultation is a key element of the partnership approach followed in Ireland. There is still room for increasing learner and family participation in decision-making that concerns them.

Project countries’ strengths and challenges

This section presents the strengths and challenges in the policy system of each country in relation to the 14 elements for a comprehensive system for inclusive education.

Table 1. Policy system strengths and challenges by element – Finland

Element	Strengths	Challenges
Legislation and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stated commitment, to develop an inclusive direction. • Three-tier system of support. • Reform efforts have been initiated by amending key education acts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for learners in need of special support is based on the logic of integration rather than the principles of inclusion • Absence of a clear definition of inclusive education and consistent implementation of inclusive practices, in line with international mandates.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Funding and resource allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A significant part of Finnish education is publicly funded. • The settings in all levels of education are maintained by local authorities, mainly municipalities, or joint municipal authorities. • The positive discrimination system and the provision of funding for each learner who is eligible for specialist provision are examples of funding policies that support inclusive education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The allocation of funds for the specialist support provided within the three-tier support system is organised by the municipalities that do not follow a unified system. • This leads to increased disparity in the financial opportunities for providing basic education and quality provision. • In some cases when there are insufficient funds, decisions may not support inclusion.
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralised system. • Educational autonomy is high at all levels. • The schools have the right to provide educational services according to their own administrative arrangements and visions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased autonomy does not always safeguard equal opportunities for all learners. • The provision of support can vary considerably from one municipality to another.
Quality assurance and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluation is carried out by the education providers themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many education providers lack a well-functioning self-evaluation system or a systematic evaluation culture as part of their quality assessment activities. • The area of monitoring and evaluation requires further development. • New quality-assurance policies are needed, which embed inclusive and diversity principles in evaluation practices, for inclusion.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Teacher professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is flexibility in teacher education curricula to address the changing skills needs of teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to upgrade the qualifications of the teaching staff, including ECEC and special education teachers, with a focus on teachers' pedagogical competences and collaboration skills. • The role of specialists needs to change to serve learning in inclusive settings rather than segregated settings. • Further guidance and high-quality training for inclusion is needed.
Curriculum and assessment framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ECEC National Curriculum makes clear references to inclusive education principles. • Municipalities and schools have the flexibility to design their own curricula based on the national core curriculum. • The local autonomy of schools is very high, and teachers have considerable independence in the classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apart from the ECEC National Curriculum, there are no clear references on inclusive education principles in the curricula for the other education levels. • There are no specific guidelines on the intensity, duration and content of support. • Need to establish a closer link between inclusive education and the provision of support within the curriculum.
Collaboration and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are forums and networks that promote collaboration and communication (e.g. Teacher Education Forum, ELY, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not clear how all the organisations/networks in Finland contribute to collaboration for inclusive education.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
<p>Early childhood education and family support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children can participate in ECEC and receive support. • Participation in ECEC is considered a right for all children aged 0–6 years. • Access to ECEC is dependent upon fees, and the state supports families to this end. • The operational culture of ECEC is developed following the principles of inclusion, and an individual ECEC plan outlines the support a child needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finland needs to increase enrolment in non-compulsory ECEC education (e.g. by free access at an earlier age). • The ECEC curriculum needs to draw the links to the provision of support. • The role of ECEC special groups and the functioning of a few special kindergartens need to be reconsidered. • Need to increase the number of qualified ECEC teachers.
<p>Support for transitions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools are obligated to share information during school transition phases. • There is clear policy on transitions in ECEC. • Preparatory Education for Vocational Qualifications (TUVA) supports transitions from compulsory to upper secondary education. • Learners who are entitled to special needs education support are supported in transitions by guidance counsellors. • In VET, there is a personal competence development plan which is developed by a teacher or guidance and career counsellor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although there is a clear policy for transitions in ECEC, no similar documents were found for the other levels of education. • Equal attention should be paid to all types of transitions and levels of education.
<p>Co-operation between school-level stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provision of learner support through the three-tiered system is seen as a collaborative effort involving learners and families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no clear information on how the collaboration is enacted for the provision of the three-tiered system. • Need to set priorities to define and improve multi-professional collaboration by creating clearer structures and practices.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are several mechanisms to collect data in education (e.g. FINEEC). • System data is used as an evidence base to inform and develop education policy and recommendations. • Data which is published once a year includes statistics of support for learning for learners receiving intensified or special support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are alarming performance gaps according to learner characteristics. • High rates of learners who do not complete upper secondary education. • Data collection mechanisms are considered an area under development.
Transforming specialist provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist provision is in place, and it is provided based on the three-tier support system. • The provision of special needs education is available in a special group, class or school. • Individual education plans (IEPs) indicate the provision of education and other support in accordance with the decision on special support issued for the learner. • There is a national network of specialist provision for delivering support services to schools (i.e. Valteri). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to focus on changing the role of specialist provision. • Although there is no special curriculum, in practice, learners with official diagnosis leading to support follow an Individual Education Plan. Some students study by activity area. • Special teachers need to obtain competences in collaboration and co-teaching. • The role of Valteri could be evaluated to consider how it could further support inclusive education.
Inclusive school leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education leaders are expected to have a teaching qualification. • School principals need to have a master's degree and teaching qualification, appropriate work experience and a certificate in educational administration or equivalent qualification. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finnish leaders seem to lack the necessary inclusive skills and qualities. • Inclusive values and acceptance of difference is an area that leadership training should focus on, stressing also well-being, safety and respect for others.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Learner and family participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners and parents or guardians can express their views on the provision of support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to strengthen the role of learners and families in multi-professional co-operation. The issue of co-operation with disadvantaged families or with families from multi-cultural backgrounds is a challenge. There are not specific and sufficient structures and processes in place that safeguard the right of learners and families to participation.

Table 2. Policy system strengths and challenges by element – Ireland

Element	Strengths	Challenges
Legislation and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High commitment to promote and develop inclusive education. Progress has been made in developing a more equitable resourcing system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to adopt a clear definition of inclusion in education policy. Existing policies for inclusive education need to be fully implemented while constantly assessing their effectiveness. The current system results in exclusion of some learners with SEN as it implements a process of selection, very often for young learners, which results in separation throughout their life's course.
Funding and resource allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ireland invested considerably in providing resources for SEN learners. The requirement for a SEN diagnosis for access to a special education teacher or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) was removed. The 2017 Special Education Teacher model has had an important impact on mainstream education and mainstream teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding does not ensure an active participation in mainstream education for some learners with SEN. The diagnosis-based approach for access to a special class or special school has led to an increase of individual support resources as well as to the development of additional special classes in mainstream and special schools.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are partnerships between the state and various private agencies. • High level of stakeholder involvement and consultation processes of all involved in the teaching–learning process. • School-level governance has been discussed and developed in recent years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different surveys have made clear that there are demands for alternative school governance and management.
Quality assurance and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are quality assurance structures and processes in place. • Some bodies have a leading role on evaluation (e.g. the Inspectorate of the Department of Education, the Education Research Centre). • Ireland has a growing interest in self-evaluation, e.g. The Looking at Our School Quality Framework for Schools is intended to support the school self-evaluation process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External evaluation remains the main form of school assessment. • There is a need for more careful monitoring of the response to interventions and the development of targeted plans and individualised planning for learners across all levels of the Continuum of Support.
Teacher professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Teaching Council is the main body responsible for preparing teachers, mandating entry standards to the profession, commissioning research, accrediting initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and focusing on continuous teacher professional learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to further develop TPL for inclusive education. • Changes in TPL should focus on inclusive education pedagogies, the adaptation of curriculum and best practices in applying the principles of universal design for learning.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Curriculum and assessment framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ‘Framework for Junior Cycle’ (2015) (ages 12–15) provides a multi-layered curriculum reform. • The introduction of Level 1 and Level 2 learning programmes has provided learners with SEN appropriate curriculum pathways at junior cycle level. • There are guidelines available for supporting teachers in mediating the curriculum for learners with SEN. • The NCSE reviewed the primary curriculum framework in different areas. This is currently in consultation phase. • The Continuum of Support model has the potential to gather and analyse data as well as plan and review learner progress and respond to their needs through assessment and intervention. • The NCSE Policy Advice (2024) encourages mainstream schools to fully explore the potential of supports and tools, including the learner’s response to intervention, prior to the placement of the learner in a special class or school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are several aspects of implementation of the Continuum of Support model that require attention. • There is an urgent need to provide senior cycle curriculum pathways for learners with SEN.
Collaboration and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder collaboration, co-operation and effective communication is considered a major strength of the Irish system. • The NCSE ensures that communication processes are facilitated between levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inter-departmental and inter-agency collaboration are required to support the development of an inclusive education system (see, for example, in the SIM model). • There is a need to involve stakeholders to ensure policies are tailored to their needs.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Early childhood education and family support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent policy and programmes promote inclusion and embrace diversity in early learning and care. Such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028; – Better Start Access and Inclusion model (AIM); – Leadership for INclusion programme (LINC). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the increase of numbers of learners being diagnosed with SEN in their early years, those children are potentially labelled for their whole school career. • Despite Ireland’s commitment to invest in ECEC, the absence of specific curriculum guidelines for early intervention classes poses one of the main challenges and is an area for further development.
Support for transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition is supported by the National Disability and Inclusion Strategy (2017–2021) and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities (2015–2024). • Targeted policies include, among others, the Optional Transition Year in the Senior Cycle (age 15–18), and the Education Passport. • SENOs, teachers and guidance counsellors, are also responsible for supporting the transition of learners from primary to post-primary schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need to further support transition to further/higher education and/or employment. • There is a need to develop concrete strategies to ensure teacher collaboration at times of transition. • More detailed transition planning should be undertaken throughout a learner’s educational pathway, especially in the case of transfer to a special class or special school, and when transferring from primary to post-primary schools. • The NCSE also recommends reviewing regularly and formally – at least once per year – learners’ placement in special schools and classes.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Co-operation between school-level stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ireland’s partnership approach is adopted across the system and invests in the co-operation of multiple education stakeholders. • A positive example of this approach at the level of leadership is the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) which promotes a continuum of leadership development for schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NCSE recommends developing a co-professional educational model to ensure a co-ordinated approach and capacity-building in schools, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – better communication between teaching teams; – involvement of parents of learners in the planning and reviewing of individualised education and care plans; – annual review of all learners’ placement in special classes collaboratively.
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department of Education has different mechanisms in place to collect and share data at all levels of education (e.g. Health Service Executive, and the DoE Inspectorate). • In primary and post-primary schools, the official approach to identification, planning and review of response to intervention for learners with SEN is the Continuum of Support. • The NCSE collects data with the aim of advising the Ministry on future educational provision for learners with SEN. There are various channels and bodies for data collection and system evaluation with the aim of improving special education provision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The DoE’s Inspectorate stressed the need of collecting longitudinal data to gain an insight of the longer-term outcomes for learners who attended special classes. • The NCSE indicates the need to generate data on learner outcomes and experiences that can inform future policy options.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Transforming specialist provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Irish system has moved gradually from the provision of segregated care and health services to more inclusive, community-based services. • Since 2017, mainstream schools are given the flexibility to allocate special education teaching hours based on the identified learning needs rather than on a disability category through use of the Continuum of Support approach. • The role of the SNAs is defined but remains flexible to a certain extent. • The School Inclusion Model (SIM) has focused on providing access to appropriate resources in a timely and efficient manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A high proportion of the school-going population are still educated separately in special classes or special schools. There is an alarming increase in special class provision which is in tension with inclusive principles. • NCSE calls for the greater proportion of SNAs in mainstream classes, flexible subject choices and timetables, and strong leadership in schools. • Data needs to be collated and analysed to determine the effectiveness of fully mainstreaming learners and any other structural or resource issues. • Ireland should continue to strengthen and improve structures that enable the full inclusion of learners with SEN in their local schools.
Inclusive school leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ireland has invested efforts in developing leadership capacity, and there is a clear focus on leadership as a distributed concept. • Examples of good practice are the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), and the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The areas of improvement involve enhancing inclusive leadership practices by promoting a culture and climate in their schools that is supportive of all learners, especially those who are vulnerable or have SEN. • School leadership should play a key role in determining which teachers are allocated to special classes.



Element	Strengths	Challenges
Learner and family participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents' voices and family participation is highlighted in the Special Education Review Committee report (SERC) in 1993, and strengthened also through the NPC and school management boards. Different bodies such as NCSE, Oide, and the Junior Cycle aim to enhance schools' capacity for inclusion and the development of learning communities. Learner and family participation is enabled through the individualised planning process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is still space for improvement to promote more meaningful involvement of learners in decision-making and listening to their experiences more attentively. A shared decision-making process on placement options through the annual review of learners' placement in special classes has been proposed to increase the participation of all stakeholders including learners and parents. Learner participation can be promoted by increasing accessibility of the learning environments.

Common issues and areas of development

The findings of this review indicate common areas and issues that countries could pay attention to and prioritise for further system development. These areas are discussed briefly below.

Broadening the concept of inclusion

The analysis of both systems reveals that the way in which inclusion is conceptualised in legislation and policy in relation to how it is implemented can be conflicting in certain cases. Some pieces of legislation still seem to focus on specific groups of learners (especially those with SEN) and their need for specialist provision. Selective placement practices which favour the inclusion of some learners in mainstream settings and result in the exclusion of others into special schools and classes (such as of those learners with more complex needs in the case of Ireland, or of migrant learners in the case of Finland) is also a shared area of concern.

Both countries would benefit by promoting **a common understanding and commitment on inclusive values and attitudes in all system stakeholders**. Developing a concept of inclusive education that fully reflects the right of **all learners** to high-quality inclusive education also includes paying particular attention to the **issue of intersectionality**, i.e. learners facing additional or overlapping challenges. **Wider groups of learners and their intersectional needs should be at the core of any effort to develop more inclusive education systems.**



Addressing inequitable resource allocation

The way resources are allocated in both countries can be considered in some cases inequitable. In the case of Finland, there seems to be considerable regional differences in the way resources are allocated; in the case of Ireland, some resources are allocated based on an SEN diagnosis which has led to an increase of individual support, and to the development of additional special classes and schools.

To avoid labelling and categorisation, countries could focus more on **funding mechanisms that encourage preventative measures**, such as:

- re-allocating resources towards a whole-school approach that follows a universal design approach to teaching and learning;
- empowering schools to transform their organisation, teaching practices and classroom environments to raise all learners' achievement and well-being;
- promoting a trusting and collaborative climate that encourages the whole school to work continuously on raising achievement opportunities for all.

It becomes clear that countries should be engaged in **a deeper national dialogue and consideration on how resources can be re-allocated to support further inclusion and equity.**

Implementing the three-level support model

Both countries use a three-level support model as a common approach of responding to diverse learner needs (see the Irish 'Continuum of Support' and the Finnish 'three-tier support' model). Although the Irish model is considered progressive in theory, there is a lack of clarity of how it can be put into practice effectively, without segregating learners. Similarly, the Finnish model can also be implemented in inclusive or exclusive ways.

What matters most is not whether the three-level support model is inclusive or not, but **the way it is enacted** in both country contexts. In that regard, **extending the practice of assessing all learners' needs** and not just those who are identified as having SEN should be considered a priority. While the three-level model seems to enable problem-solving to support and respond to diverse learner needs, **attention needs to be paid to not perpetuate the existence of separate systems or segregate learners through its implementation.**

Enhancing multi-professional support and collaboration

Among project countries' priorities is to define and reinforce multi-professional collaboration at all levels, by creating clearer structures and practices that are expected to improve guiding documents and teacher professional development. In both contexts, special education teachers and specialist support staff currently seem to be the ones responsible for implementing intensive and/or special support at school level.

To move further towards this direction, it is important to **develop clearer processes for co-operation between mainstream and specialist teachers with the aim of providing accessible learning environments.** Strengthening collaborative structures would also require **more systematic engagement of learners and families in educational decisions.** Moving the emphasis from separate systems to enhanced collaboration and thinking 'out



of the box' also requires **working with colleagues from other sectors to address learners' intersectional needs. Examining the organisation and operation of the existing collaborative structures within local authorities and municipalities** could assist project countries in setting up stronger local educational networks to ensure cohesive planning of resource allocation, decision-making and monitoring.

Supporting curriculum reforms

Both countries are initiating more open curriculum frameworks with a focus on skills, competences and learning outcomes. However, the document analysis reveals different understandings and policy frameworks around the curriculum between the two countries. In Finland, considerable local/school variations exist in the way curriculum is implemented, because of greater school autonomy. In Ireland, a particular area of attention is how new curriculum frameworks should be enacted within the Continuum of Support.

A closer link between inclusive education and the provision of support within the curriculum seems to be essential in both cases. Any review of the curriculum should include a **re-examination of the success indicators, so that these will be aligned with the essential competences** that are defined within the relevant policies. When there are no special curricula, there are Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that usually function as special curricula. **All responsible departments within ministries, in collaboration with relevant bodies/agencies and universities, should examine and review the curriculum content** and the way it is taught to ensure its alignment with inclusive principles and the provision of support.

Improving the system's capacity building

In both countries, a lack of inclusive skills in mainstream and special provision tends to feed demand for intervention and compensatory approaches, rather than focusing more on preventative measures through general support. In Ireland, many teachers in mainstream schools consider themselves inadequately equipped or trained to respond to learners with SEN, especially those with more complex support needs. In Finland, there is a shortage of qualified ECEC and special teachers, and the teachers there seem to lack pedagogical competences related to support, inclusion and collaboration.

Both countries have identified the need for developing programmes of **professional learning** (from initial teacher education and induction to continuing professional development) **that focuses on inclusive education.**

Some key approaches to raise the workforce capacity in mainstream schools include:

- changing the qualifications of the teaching staff, including special education teachers, to focus more on inclusive pedagogies;
- the adaptation of curriculum and best practices in applying the principles of universal design for learning.

Countries have also identified the **need to improve structures and training for inclusive leadership.** These findings suggest that in both contexts **inclusive leadership competences need to be defined more clearly and to be embedded in professional learning standards and/or qualifications.**



Focusing on school self-evaluation

From the analysis of the policy information, it emerged that both countries tend to put more emphasis on school-level evaluations. However, it also appeared that coverage for policies addressing issues around monitoring and quality assurance was less comprehensive than other policy areas. In the case of Ireland, more consideration should be given to how to establish and further nurture this culture and practice of self-evaluation in schools. In the case of Finland, schools need to embed inclusive and diversity principles in the current evaluation practices, and the government could follow more systematically the diversification within municipalities.

Any central monitoring strategy can include **indicators to monitor performance at school level**. With regards to improving inclusion, the focus of monitoring should be broader, examining, for example, learners' equal opportunities to reach their full potential, their well-being outcomes and socio-emotional development. **School self-review tools could be developed to focus on barriers to learning** and how inclusive the school has become, and **the extent to which different subgroups of learners are succeeding and being served by the school**. When deciding to disaggregate data to monitor the needs and challenges of specific diverse groups of learners, countries should always consider the risks of labelling learners.

Closing remarks

This executive summary of the Deliverable 2.3 'Findings report on the legislative frameworks of inclusive provision of Finland and Ireland' has provided an insight into the desk review on the legislative frameworks of Finland and Ireland. The desk review attempts to provide a 'snapshot' of project countries' legislation and policies related to inclusive provision, with the aim of identifying and highlighting areas for further development. The policy areas identified, and the key issues of consideration, will be used to inform the next phases of the project work, and will specifically feed into the content-related discussions with the stakeholders in the national consultations phase.