

MIPIE conference

Mapping the implementation of policy for inclusive education

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

Hotel Martin's Central Park – Boulevard Charlemagne 80 – 1000 Brussels

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Mr. Pascal Smet, the Flemish Minister of Education, Equal Opportunities, Youth and Brussels, I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all. Unfortunately, the Minister was not able to attend himself due to other obligations with regards to the Belgian Presidency. He sends his greetings to all of you and trusts you will have constructive discussions about the implementation of policy for inclusive education. He also thanks the European Agency to share with us very interesting reflections on inclusive education.

The Mapping project clearly indicates that all countries need to track the implementation of new educational policies and legislation. One of the justifications for these developments and this exercise is found at international level in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that calls for data collection and monitoring at State level.

This Convention is a great challenge for all those countries that have already ratified it. Belgium and the several governments ratified the Convention and the optional protocol in the summer of 2009. Especially for our country, we see the Convention as a stimulus for a process of change and development in the field of special needs education.

It is the merit of the Agency that the position of Flanders within the European context was clarified by the work that is done every two years with the SEN data collection. Although the comparison of educational systems is not an easy one and even more difficult as it comes to special

needs education, we all agree that Flanders is a region that identifies a substantial number of children with special educational needs. But these pupils are much more often found in segregated settings rather than in inclusive settings. The percentage of pupils in those settings is among the highest in Europe, despite the spectacular growth in the last decade of pupils with disabilities in integrated education in mainstream schools.

The high number of pupils in special schools is an educational practice that contradicts strongly with article 24 of the Convention that puts inclusive education first, and considers special education as the exception. To start the implementation process we requested a network of professors of educational law to advise the Department of Education on the impact of article 24 on the Flemish educational policy and practice. This effort has resulted in a very interesting document that we are now debating about with the trade unions and umbrella organisations of schools in order to see how we can move forward. (You can find the document on the website of the Department of Education).

The debate with the stakeholders takes place in the preparation of a new policy framework we are preparing to replace the legal framework on special education that was decided in 1970. The public debate about the **reform** of education for children with special needs in Flanders has been continuing for 10 years already. A first draft for a new legislation of 'adapted learning support' was adopted by the Flemish Government on the 19th of November 2008.

The primary goal of adapted learning support is to better define the existing special needs provision in mainstream and special education. We situate it within one and the same framework. This provides us with a clear overall insight into the lacunae and as such allows us to complement and improve the provision where necessary. The 'Adapted learning support' framework also seeks to advance new developments

by offering pupils who need an individual learning pathway the chance to enrol in a mainstream school. In addition a distinction is made in the pupil population of special education between two adapted learning support levels so as to better meet the needs of pupils with severe and complex problems.

‘Adapted learning support’ is not a one-sided "either/or" story: "either inclusion or special education". It is a differentiated "both/and" story which continues to value and support the merits of special education. We are therefore convinced that a lot of parents will continue to make the conscious choice of special education.. However, we also seek to offer these pupils more opportunities to enrol in mainstream education. The government thus does not make any choices, it merely creates more possibilities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to use this opportunity to highlight two conferences that took place during the Belgian EU Presidency and had a substantive link with the theme you are going to deal with in the next two days.

The first one is the conference “Breaking the cycle of disadvantage: social inclusion in and through education”. The second one took place just a week ago and focused on the implementation of article 33 of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. This article explains that States must set national focal points in order to monitor the implementation of the Convention. States must also set some sort of independent monitoring mechanisms – which usually takes the form of an independent national human rights institution. The full participation of civil society, in particular persons with disabilities and their representative organizations is essential in the national monitoring and implementation process. This means that indicators will be needed in order to follow up the process of putting the content of the Convention into real practice.

On a European level, the conference on breaking the cycle of disadvantage has led to a working document, a so-called “presidency discussion paper” about *the role of education in combating poverty, inequality and social exclusion*. The paper was discussed at the Council meeting of the Ministers of Education, Youth, Culture and Sport on 18-19 November 2010.

The central message of the conference that was included in the discussion document was that Member States need to intensify their efforts to introduce effective and comprehensive educational policy strategies. These strategies must tackle educational inequalities because inequalities can lead to poverty and exclusion.

In order to do this, measuring the progress in policy implementation is considered to be essential. Aggregate national and European averages often mask regional and local realities. So it was suggested to the Ministers that there is a need to examine possible new approaches towards monitoring progress. One way would be to develop and improve reliable and comparable statistical tools. These must lead to better measurement and monitoring educational inequality at national, regional and local level. More attention should be paid to monitoring educational equality in existing progress reports.

As breaking the cycle of disadvantage is a shared responsibility, it was suggested that all stakeholders need to be involved. In addition better co-operation is needed between different policy domains such as education and training, employment, social affairs, youth, migration, housing, welfare and culture.

During the discussions in the Council of Ministers they all agreed upon the importance of monitoring, although there were disagreements about how it should be done. The Flemish Attaché at the Permanent

Representation of Belgium to the EU has used the information about the MIPIE project in the preparation of the Council meeting and distributed the information to key people. He will also emphasize the importance of the project in his discussions with the Hungarian and European authorities.

The European Commission has planned a communication for 2011 on *Equity in education and training to support European inclusive growth*. It will open the discussion on measuring progress in breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

It is clear that what is on your agenda for today and tomorrow connects with issues that are also on the European agenda and the agenda of your Ministers.

Concerning Flanders, we regard the MIPIE project as very valuable and useful for mapping our policy. So I hope you will have a very fruitful conference. We will contribute, through our experts in the project team and the project steering group, to ensure this project becomes a success. We look forward to your results and are confident that they will be an inspiration for the monitoring of progress in the implementation of inclusive educational policy.

Thank you very much for your attention.