

Key Principles for Special Needs Education

Recommendations for Policy Makers



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Policy Makers

**European Agency for Development in Special Needs
Education**



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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

This document makes recommendations about key aspects of special needs education policy that seem to be effective in supporting the inclusion of learners with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream provision. It has been prepared by educational policy makers in order to provide fellow policy makers across Europe with a synthesis of the policy findings that have emerged from the thematic work to date of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (for more general information on the work of the European Agency, please refer to Section 4).

This thematic work has been conducted through extended projects, usually involving all European Agency member countries¹. The projects were selected by member countries to reflect areas of interest and concern to them. The projects used a variety of methodologies (questionnaires, reviews of country-based literature or face to face exchanges of experience involving country experts) and resulted in a range of outputs (printed documents, electronic reports and resources). A full list of the themes covered in this document is provided in Section 5 – References and Sources.

Within all countries in Europe, there is a recognition that inclusive education - or as termed in the Charter of Luxembourg (1996) *A School for All* - provides an important foundation for ensuring equality of opportunity for people with special needs in all aspects of their life (education, vocational training, employment and social-life). Inclusive education requires flexible education systems that are responsive to the diverse and often complex needs of individual learners.

¹ As of the beginning of 2003, the European Agency member countries are: Austria, Belgium (Flemish speaking Community), Belgium (French speaking Community), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania participate as observers.



Each thematic project has focused on different aspects of educational inclusion that provides all learners with full and equal access to education within their local community. However, it is important to note that there are different national contexts for inclusion. For example, the number of learners in compulsory education identified as having SEN in each country varies enormously - from less than 1% in some countries, to more than 10% in others. The percentage of learners with SEN in special schools and classes also varies widely, with some countries placing less than 1% of all learners in separate schools and classes and others more than 4%. These differences reflect differences in assessment procedures and funding arrangements rather than differences in the actual incidence of special educational needs across countries.

Even though there are different national contexts for inclusion, it has been possible to draw out **Key Principles** of inclusive policies and describe **Policy Findings** emerging from Agency thematic projects. These are set out in Sections 2 and 3 respectively.



SECTION 2: KEY PRINCIPLES

The principles set out in this section reflect universal elements of policies relating to special needs education that appear, from the European Agency's studies, to form an effective framework for promoting inclusive education.

A framework of law and policy that supports inclusion

Educational legislation within countries should clearly state inclusion is a goal. Legislation should lead to the provision of facilities that enhance developments and processes working towards inclusion. In particular, there should be one legal framework covering all compulsory school sectors.

Governments should have a clearly stated and communicated policy towards inclusive education. For the process of implementation of inclusive education, the Government should make very clear what the goals of the policy are to all members of the educational community.

Educational policy should:

- take account of the needs of all learners with SEN in the planning, financing and formation, implementation and evaluation of all education strategies;
- be underpinned by the philosophy of promoting inclusion and meeting individual learners' needs within all educational sectors;
- be flexible enough to reflect local level needs;
- provide for the phased development of inclusion policy. In the short term there should be a recognisable separate action plan or strategy within general policy; in the medium term, inclusion should become part of general policy; in the long term, inclusion should be "a given" within all educational policies and strategies;
- be multi-phase and trans-sectoral and actively encourage inter-sectoral co-operation. At national and local levels, policy makers from the educational, health



and social sectors need to work co-operatively to devise policies and plans that will facilitate and actively support a multi-disciplinary approach in the pre-school sector, compulsory schooling, the transition phase from school to employment and within post compulsory education, particularly the higher education sector;

- take account of international level policies and initiatives, specifically European level policies and initiatives need to be considered within the formation of national level policies. This will ensure that access to all possible resources and opportunities for learners with SEN is facilitated through information about European Community programmes (such as SOCRATES and LEONARDO).

Leadership in relation to policy implementation is of the highest importance. Governments, regional policymakers at the level of communities, school districts or school clusters as well as head teachers have an essential role in translating and implementing governmental policy into practice. Their efforts should be actively supported by policies that are clearly communicated and actually assist them in their leadership role.

Resourcing arrangements that promote inclusion

Funding of special needs education is one of the most significant factors determining inclusion. If funds are not allocated in line with an explicit policy, inclusion is unlikely to be realised in practice. The following are features of resourcing arrangements that appear to be effective in promoting inclusion:

- decentralised funding approaches that enable local organisations to support effective practice. A decentralised model is likely to be more cost-effective and more responsive to the needs of local populations;
- flexibility for schools in using financial resources according to their own identified needs and requirements within the context of national policies.



Appropriate and flexible forms of support for teachers working with learners with SEN should be the aim and result of policies. The availability of support from specialised teachers plays a crucial part, as it cannot be expected that all classroom teachers have the knowledge and expertise to meet every specific need. Policy makers must ensure that the content of teacher support systems is diverse and responsive to local level and individual needs.

Limited or no access to certain facilities and provision may actually hinder inclusion and equality of opportunity for learners with SEN.

Consideration of the role of special (separate) schools is required as there is a trend in Europe towards the transformation of special schools into resource centres. Such a development has clear implications for policy makers in relation to short and long-term planning of all forms of resourcing and provision.

Effective arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and accountability

Achieving positive outcomes for learners with SEN requires effective arrangements for monitoring and evaluating provision. Promoting partnerships between schools, local policy makers and parents also requires those arrangements to be transparent so that there is greater accountability for the services provided, particularly within a decentralised system. Independent evaluation of the quality of education for learners with SEN should therefore be part of any arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and accountability.

A focus on widening access and opportunity

Inclusive education policies are designed to widen access to education and promote opportunities for all learners with special educational needs to realise their potential. The following



aspects of policy have been found to make a significant contribution to achieving this:

- involving parents as full partners in the process of educating their children by enabling them to have access to information and first hand experiences of different forms of educational provision so that they can make informed choices;
- encouraging local organisations and schools to overcome barriers to learning and assessment that prevent access to the curriculum. The medical approach to assessment of learning needs using the concept of 'handicap' should be replaced by a more wide-ranging educational approach, which is concerned with providing access to appropriate forms of the curriculum. This could be done through developing an individual educational programme (IEP);
- promoting positive attitudes in education. Parental and teacher attitudes towards the education of learners with SEN appear to be largely determined by personal experiences. Educational policies must recognise these attitudinal factors and incorporate strategies and resources to address them;
- encouraging all teachers to assume responsibility for all learners, whatever their individual needs. This is a crucial factor in promoting inclusion and should be an integral part of policies. A critical factor in this is equipping all teachers with the professional knowledge and skills so that they are able to meet this challenge;
- providing access to a variety of flexible training opportunities and routes for teachers and other staff. The importance of equipping mainstream teachers with the skills to meet a diversity of learners' needs cannot be overstated;
- harnessing the potential of ICT (information and communication technology) to reduce inequalities in education and support educational inclusion through meeting individual learners' specific needs. Policy should focus upon promoting the use of appropriate ICT as a tool for improving access to the curriculum and achieving



curriculum goals;

- supporting transition from school to employment through clear legislation and policy measures that encourage the direct involvement and close co-operation of the learner, their family and school, the labour market and all parties concerned.

Areas for future policy development

As a result of the European Agency thematic work, it is evident that there are a number of key areas of inclusive educational policy that require particular attention:

- the *tension* between the need for schools to demonstrate increasing academic achievements and the position of learners with SEN is increasing. This is an area of present and future concern. Account of the learning achievements of learners with SEN in terms of added value needs to be fully considered;
- systematic *monitoring and evaluation procedures* need to be developed. In general the issue of accountability needs to be addressed within the framework of special needs education in inclusive and separate special settings;
- flexible *frameworks of provision* that support inclusive practice must be applied to all sectors of educational provision. The inclusion of learners with special educational needs within the secondary sector, transition from school to employment phase, post compulsory and adult education needs to be given the same degree of focus as within the pre-primary and primary sectors;
- a genuine *commitment* to promoting inclusion in countries will be indicated by a decrease in the number of learners in fully separate (segregated) provision.

Policy makers may need to consider these issues carefully in relation to the development of national and local level educational policies.



SECTION 3: POLICY FINDINGS WITHIN THEMATIC AREAS

This section outlines some of the main policy related findings from European Agency thematic work. These findings informed the Key Principles in Section 2. The information is drawn from across all the European Agency's studies (please refer to Section 4 - References and Sources) in relation to three areas of special educational practice: inclusion, financing and classroom practice.

Inclusion in Europe

All European countries have already implemented or are currently implementing policies to promote inclusive education. In relation to the provision of special needs education in Europe a number of trends can be recognized.

There is a trend towards the transformation of special schools into resource centres, particularly in countries where there is a large proportion of learners in separate special school settings. Generally, the following tasks are identified for these resource centres:

- provision of training and professional development for teachers;
- development and dissemination of materials and approaches;
- support for mainstream schools and parents;
- short-term or part-time help for individual learners;
- support with respect to entrance into the labour market.

In order to make the work of resource centres effective, co-operation between special and mainstream schools is essential.

With regards to the assessment of learners with SEN, it is apparent that definitions and categories of special needs vary across countries. Some countries define only one or two types of special needs. Others categorize learners with SEN in the compulsory school sector within more than 10 types.



Most countries make use of an individual educational programme (IEP) for compulsory school learners with SEN. The way the mainstream curriculum is followed, necessary additional resources, the goals and the evaluation of the educational approach taken are usually incorporated into such a document.

Whilst it appears that parents generally have positive attitudes towards inclusion, attitudes are largely determined by personal experiences. Positive experiences of inclusion are rarely reported in countries where the specialist educational facilities and support are concentrated within the special school system and not available within mainstream schools. Where specialist resources and services are offered in mainstream schools, parents develop positive attitudes.

In countries with a strong special school sector, parental pressure towards inclusion is increasing. In countries where inclusion is common practice, positive attitudes of parents are reported, but in the case of learners with more severe special needs, parents (and sometimes learners themselves) tend to prefer special education in a separate setting as there is the perception that special schools have more resources, competence and skills than mainstream schools in highly specialised areas.

Financing

Countries have adopted different models of funding for special education, but there are two main models:

- a centralised model where national level policy dictates systems of funding - direct input-funding models for special schools or pupil bound budget systems are examples of centralised approaches;
- a decentralised system, where the region or municipality has the main responsibility for the organisation of special education resources and services.



In countries with a centralised, direct input-funding model for special schools, there is generally significant internal criticism of the system and different forms of strategic behaviour by parents, teachers or others in the educational field which can result in less inclusion, more labelling and rising costs. Funds can be diverted to non-educational matters such as litigation and diagnostic procedures. Furthermore, these countries can be identified as having relatively higher percentages of learners with SEN in separate, special school settings.

The financing system of pupil bound budgeting (where funds are allocated to individual learners to meet their specific needs) also appears to have disadvantages. In practice, clear-cut criteria are required if funds are tied to learners. If it is not possible to develop these criteria, pupil bound budgets are not successful in meeting needs. Generally, it appears desirable for funds for special education to be directed to improving provision on a whole school basis for all learners with SEN, creating an inclusive setting, rather than allocated to a particular pupil.

Countries with a strongly decentralised funding system generally report positive effects. These systems are characterised by budgets for special educational needs being delegated from the central level to regional institutions (municipalities, districts, school clusters) where decisions are taken as to how the money is spent and which learners should benefit from special services. Countries with such funding approaches report very few negative side effects and are usually satisfied with their system of financing. Systems where the municipalities make decisions on the basis of information from school support services or advisory centres and where the allocation of more funds to separate settings directly influences the amount of funds for mainstream schools, seem to be very effective in achieving inclusion.

However, it appears to be advisable for the institution that decides upon the allocation of special needs budgets firstly to make use of independent expertise in the area of special needs and secondly to have the capacity and mechanisms to implement and maintain specialist strategies and services.



Classroom Practice

The European Agency's thematic work indicates that truly inclusive classrooms do exist throughout European countries and that effective teaching for learners with SEN is good for all learners.

Behaviour, social and/or emotional difficulties are identified as presenting the biggest challenge in relation to the inclusion of learners with SEN in mainstream provision. More generally, handling differences or diversity of learners' needs in the classroom is one of the biggest challenges.

Five educational approaches appear to be effective within inclusive education:

- *co-operative teaching* - teachers working together with other teachers (a specialist teacher or colleague), the head teacher and other professionals;
- *co-operative learning* - learners that help each other, especially when they have unequal levels of ability, benefit from learning together;
- *collaborative problem solving* - for all teachers, clear class rules and a set of borders - agreed with all the learners - alongside appropriate (dis)incentives have proved particularly effective in decreasing the amount and intensity of disturbances during lessons;
- *heterogeneous grouping* - mixed ability level groups and a more differentiated approach to teaching are necessary when dealing with a diversity of learners in the classroom;
- *effective teaching and individual planning* - all learners, including those with SEN, achieve more when systematic monitoring, assessment, planning and evaluation is applied to their work. The curriculum can be geared to their needs and additional support can be introduced effectively through an Individual Educational Programme (IEP) that fits within the normal curriculum.



There are various conditions at both the teacher level and school level that influence classroom practice and help determine the success or otherwise of inclusion. At the level of the individual teacher:

- inclusion largely depends on teachers' attitudes towards learners with SEN, their view of differences in classrooms and their willingness to respond positively and effectively to those differences;
- teachers have a key role in securing additional personnel or other resources for specific learners in close co-operation with all parties involved;
- teachers play a vital role in enhancing significant social relationships between learners. Satisfying peer relationships are crucial to the successful inclusion for learners with SEN.

At the school level:

- the organisational structure of the school determines the amount and type of resources teachers can use in teaching learners with SEN. Support can come from inside the school, but also be made available through other, external support services and co-operative links;
- at times, small groups of learners with SEN require particular attention and some withdrawal sessions may enable those learners to be maintained in the mainstream classroom. It is important that these arrangements have a natural and flexible character and are not confined to learners with SEN but are used occasionally for all learners in the classroom;
- the ability of schools to work co-operatively in order to find ways of meeting special educational needs may often be critical in achieving successful inclusion in mainstream settings;
- the leadership of the head teacher is a decisive factor in inclusive education. The head teacher often initiates and ensures that changes are implemented in schools that support successful inclusion. Such changes include



providing strategic direction, organising a team-approach to teaching and maintaining a clear focus across the school on key issues;

- the degrees of freedom a school and the head teacher have in using financial resources to support their own decisions are important in developing inclusive practice.

A crucial area for the success of inclusive strategies is the role played by parents. Parents should not only be seen as 'clients' but as 'partners' in the educational process. In co-operation with the school, outside agencies and other professionals, parents should have a clear voice and be involved in the planning, implementation, evaluation and the structure and content of their child's education, including the development of their child's IEP.



SECTION 4: ABOUT THE EUROPEAN AGENCY

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education is an independent, self-governing European body established by the Ministries of education in its member countries to act as a platform for collaboration in the field of special needs education (SNE).

The European Agency is financially and politically supported by the Ministries of Education in the Agency member countries: Austria, Belgium (Flemish speaking Community), Belgium (French speaking Community), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania participate as observers.

The European Agency actively maintains co-operative and mutually beneficial relationships with other key European and International bodies and organisations in the field of education and special needs education (such as the European Commission and its associated bodies, OECD, UNESCO, European SchoolNet, Nordic Council). This enables the European Agency to direct its users to relevant bodies who can provide information and expertise that the Agency does not necessarily possess itself.

In all aspects of its work, the European Agency takes into account key international statements on special needs education such as the United Nations Standard Rules on equality of opportunity for people with disabilities (1993), the Salamanca Statement (1994), the Charter of Luxembourg (1996), the resolution of the European Parliament relating to Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities (2001) and the European Disability Forum Madrid Declaration - Non Discrimination Plus Positive Action Results in Social Inclusion (2002).

The European Agency contributes to debates about improving educational policy, practice and provision for learners with special needs and their families. Its work takes account of



issues around equal opportunities, accessibility and inclusive education with the aim of promoting high quality education for learners with special educational needs, whilst recognising the differences in countries' policies, practices and contexts.

The main target groups for the European Agency's work are policy makers, experts and professionals who influence policy and practice in special needs education across Europe, at local and national levels. As well providing information at the European level, the European Agency facilitates professional development through the direct exchange of information and experience.

For more information on the work of the European Agency, please go to: www.european-agency.org

SECTION 5: REFERENCES and SOURCES

European Commission, DGXXII (1996) **The Charter of Luxembourg**, Brussels, Belgium

European Disability Forum (2002) **The Madrid Declaration: Non-Discrimination Plus Positive Action Results in Social Inclusion**. Brussels, Belgium

European Parliament: Resolution on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - **Towards a barrier-free Europe for people with disabilities** adopted on the 4 March 2001 (COM (2000) 284 – C5-0632/2000-2000/2296 (COS))

United Nations: **The Standard Rules for the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities**, adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 48/96 of 20 December 1993.

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The material used as the basis for this document is taken from the following European Agency publications:

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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. Editor: Meijer, C.J.W. (1999) **Financing of Special Needs Education: A seventeen country study of the relation between financing of special needs education and integration**. Middelfart, Denmark

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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. Editor Soriano, V. (1998) **Teacher Support: Support for Teachers Working with Special Needs in Mainstream Education** Middelfart, Denmark.

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. Editor Soriano, V. (2002) **Transition from School to Employment: Main problems, issues and options faced by students with special educational needs in 16 European countries** Middelfart, Denmark.

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. Editor Watkins, A. (2001) **Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Special Needs Education (SNE)**, Middelfart, Denmark.



SECTION 6: FURTHER INFORMATION

The contact details of all the Political Representatives of Agency member countries can be found on the country National Pages, Representative Board Member sections of the European Agency website: www.european-agency.org

Extracts and full download electronic versions in different languages of all the source material for this document can be found in the publications section of the European Agency website: www.european-agency.org

Print copies of all these documents can be obtained free of charge from:
secretariat@european-agency.org

More detailed information on policy and practice in the area of Transition from School to Employment can be found on the Transition database:
www.european-agency.org/transit/index.html

A separate policy paper relating to transition is available from the European Agency website.

More detailed information on policy and practice in the area of ICT in SNE can be found on the ICT in SNE database:
www.european-agency.org/ict_sen_db/index.html

A future visions statement paper including aspects of ICT in SNE is available from the European Agency website.

More detailed information on Classroom Practice and Inclusion can be found on: www.european-agency.org

A separate policy paper relating to classroom practice will be published by the European Agency during 2003. This will be available from the European Agency website.



Key Principles for Special Needs Education - Recommendations for Policy Makers is a document prepared by educational policy makers for policy makers. It aims to highlight in a clear and concise way the key aspects of special needs education policy that seem to be effective in supporting the inclusion of learners with special educational needs within mainstream provision.

The key principles of inclusive policies highlighted in this document are all evidence based. This synthesis of policy findings has emerged from the thematic work to date of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education and covers a number of thematic areas: provision, financing, teacher support, early intervention, ICT, transition from school to employment and classroom practice.

It is the intention of this publication to support the process of developing inclusive education by presenting those responsible for the formation and implementation of special needs education policy with recommendations that are specifically relevant to their work.

