

# MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

## KEY POLICY MESSAGES

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the main conclusions and recommendations of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) analysis on the topic of Special Needs Education and Multicultural Diversity and highlight how the project recommendations may also contribute to other EU and international policy priorities.

In the area of special needs education, practitioners, researchers and decision-makers at EU and national levels have shown a growing interest in the situation of students with SEN with an immigrant background. In particular, there is a concern that these students from different cultural backgrounds experience multiple disadvantages in education.

### Multicultural Diversity and Special Needs Education – Trends at European and International level

Schools in Europe are becoming increasingly multicultural, creating the need to respond to new and frequently changing educational situations that are often perceived as complex. Key European and international organisations have highlighted this issue and encouraged national authorities to provide high quality education and support for all students whatever their country of origin or cultural background.

The Council of Europe *Action Plan 2006–2015* recommends that ‘people with disabilities from minority groups, disabled migrants and refugees may experience multiple disadvantages because of discrimination or lack of familiarity with public services.’ (Appendix 4.6, p. 32).

The European Commission *Green Paper on Migration* (2008) underlines that: ‘the presence of a significant number of migrant pupils has important implications for education systems ... Schools must play a leading role in creating an inclusive society, as they represent the main opportunity for young people of migrant and host communities to get to know and respect each other ... Linguistic and cultural diversity may bring an invaluable resource to schools’ (p. 3).

Equal opportunities and high quality education can make a strong contribution to achieving two of the Europe 2020 headline targets. In particular, this includes reducing early school leaving to below 10% and lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion. The Europe 2020 strategy cannot be achieved unless all children are given an adequate opportunity for education in life.

The main priorities and key challenges of multicultural diversity and special needs education/inclusive education policies and practice focus upon:

**Target population:** There is no European agreement on the terminology used to identify pupils with an immigrant background. Different terms are used: ‘ethnic minority’, ‘minority ethnic groups’, ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’, ‘bilingual pupils’, ‘minority groups’.

**Existing data:** It is impossible to build a comparable statistical picture of the number of students with an immigrant background in special needs education in Europe, as the national statistical systems are not harmonised with each other.



**Mother tongue:** There is no overall agreement about the role and use of students' mother tongue at school: while some countries are in favour of bilingual education, others argue that students should only use the language of the host country within the school.

**Professionals' profiles:** In some countries it is not considered necessary for professionals to know a lot about the student or their family's cultural background in order to interact with them. Other countries strongly support intervention by professionals having the same ethnic background as the student or the family.

**Educational measures:** Pedagogy and teaching methods in mainstream classes often fail to address the educational needs of students with SEN and an immigrant background.

**Support measures:** Providing comprehensive information to families of students with SEN and an immigrant background is crucial. Clear and accessible information should be provided to families to help them to understand how the education system works. Professionals should ensure good interaction with families and avoid cultural clashes.

**Assessment:** Taking the significant and disproportionate participation of students with an immigrant background in special education as a starting point, assessment tools and materials would seem to be culturally biased.

## The Agency Multicultural Diversity and Special Needs Education project<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the three-year Agency project has been to investigate how to respond in the best possible way to the educational needs of students with SEN from different cultural backgrounds who, in some cases, use a different language than the one used in the host country.

This dual consideration has highlighted the following key issues:

- a) The extent to which second language issues are linked to and confused with learning difficulties;
- b) How the needs and abilities of students with an immigrant background are assessed;
- c) How teachers, families and students can be supported in the best way.

The target group for the analysis covered students with special educational needs who are immigrants, or who belong to ethnic minority groups.

National experts from 25 countries<sup>2</sup>, representing the policy and practice level, were involved in the collection and analysis of country information as well as in the six country visits organised during the project.

## Project Findings and Recommendations

The main conclusions in relation to four core areas are listed below, along with key recommendations addressed to professionals and policy-makers.

**Existing data:** There is an over-representation of students with an immigrant background placed in

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<sup>1</sup> More information is available from: <https://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/multicultural-diversity-and-special-needs-education>

<sup>2</sup> Austria, Belgium (Flemish and French speaking communities), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland (French and German speaking communities) and UK (England).



provision for students with learning difficulties and/or with behavioural problems. The over-representation also highlights that there is confusion in distinguishing between language difficulties and learning difficulties.

**Recommendation:** More data should be collected and more research conducted in order to investigate the apparent disproportion of students with an immigrant background in special education settings.

**Educational provision:** Three main challenges are apparent. Firstly, the various professionals and services involved do not have the necessary combined expertise in special needs education and dealing with students from an immigrant background. Secondly, instruction in both the mother tongue and the language of the host country improves students' performance – particularly if provided at an early age. Thirdly, all countries suggest that co-operation between services as well as with parents is fundamental in this area. With regard to this, both professionals and families need to take into account the others' cultural differences.

**Recommendations:**

Policy makers should ensure that principles such as full respect of human rights and equal opportunities, guaranteed by country law, are implemented.

Such positive practice should promote integrative and inclusive policies that are open to diversity, highlighting the educational values brought by all students, whatever their ethnic origin or educational need.

Schools should have adequate guidelines and resources in order to implement inclusive practice.

Schools should have an intercultural policy that fits in with and meets the needs of the local context.

**Support measures:** The development and implementation of individual educational plans, the support and commitment of the head teacher and the staff of the school as well as effective teamwork are considered to be important factors. Teachers' competence, commitment and experience play a key role.

**Recommendations:**

Educational authorities should consider what form of bilingual education or multicultural approaches should be provided in order to ensure students' educational development, social inclusion and self-esteem.

Schools with a high percentage of multilingual students need to be encouraged to develop a school-specific language policy. This requires:

- a) Making an analysis of the school situation;
- b) Creating an 'in-school' plan and proposal, the aim being to increase the quality of support measures provided.

Teachers should adapt their teaching methods, facilitate parental involvement and be supported by qualified professionals as well as assistants with different cultural backgrounds.

**Assessment:** In order to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and the potentially biased results of standardised assessment procedures, a holistic approach focused upon the student's learning processes and development should be considered. The main elements of such an assessment are the student's level of basic skills, his/her learning history and his/her life situation.



### **Recommendations:**

Assessment procedures should facilitate the distinction between difficulties related to the acquisition of host country language and learning difficulties.

Information from all teachers involved (class, support, special, etc.) as well as parents and other professionals, such as social workers and psychologists, should be taken into account.

## **Areas for Further Policy Development**

Despite the fact that the field of multicultural diversity and special needs education is on the agenda of policy-makers in Europe, the amount of research and analysis dedicated to the specific issue of support required as a result of the complex interactions between these factors is proportionately very limited. In considering the European level policy priorities along with the findings of the Agency project, it is argued that the following areas require particular attention:

- More data should be collected and more research conducted in order to gather more evidence regarding the existence of a disproportionate number of students with SEN and an immigrant background in special provision.
- Policy makers should promote measures to increase inclusive practice by providing the required resources to schools and professionals to enable them to address the needs of a heterogeneous student population and reduce segregation and exclusion.
- Appropriate assessment materials for students with SEN and an immigrant background should be further developed.

## **Concluding Comments**

The main message from the Agency project is that further developments are needed in the field of multicultural diversity and special needs education: this requires reflection about new policies and practices to meet the needs of students with SEN with an immigrant background. To achieve this, it is necessary to conduct more research and analysis in this field. As this is the first attempt to compile this type of information at the European level, many more issues have emerged and more questions have been asked than answers given. It is therefore hoped that this first analysis and overview will open the door to further investigations into this topic.

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