

Research on Inclusive Education Approaches and Tools Summary Report

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is with the help of national and international bibliography on the subject, to give a brief outline on the state of inclusive education in the eight countries of the SOLIS project consortium (UK, Turkey, Italy, Malta, Norway, Lithuania, Greece, Spain), detect any common trends, investigate the approaches towards diversity and participation and finally report one case study or good practice per each country.

A. THE LEGAL – INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

- The legal basis

All eight countries have embraced inclusive education as a goal in their educational systems. The trend can be traced back into a series of international conventions and treaties that have been incorporated into national legislations. We will not expand here on national legislative interventions that aim towards the attainment of inclusive education as this would far exceed the confines of this report.

We will only mention some of the most important and influential legal texts that have paved the way towards the introduction of national legislation aiming at inclusive education:

The Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990)

The Salamanca Statement On principles, policy and practice in special needs education (UNESCO 1994)

The United Nations Millennium Development goals (UN, 2000) and more recently

The UN's goals for sustainable development (UN, 2018) (specifically SDG 4 that states as a goal to “ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”)

It should be mentioned that national constitutions have also been a source for the development and adoption of legislation towards inclusive education. We can see this legislative trend gaining momentum from 1990's onwards and continuing into this decade.

- Laws, Policies and Institutions

Another reason that we do not linger so much on legal frameworks is that according to the international experience laws tend to target specific groups. According to UNESCO¹ only 10% of the countries worldwide have comprehensive provisions for all learners.

On the other hand, policies (e.g. as enshrined in school curricula) tend to have a broader vision on inclusion (one such policy is the Maltese National Inclusive Education Framework. For more on this initiative see the case studies- good practices section below). However, it cannot be stressed enough that policies have to be consistent and coherent across all educational levels, as fragmentary interventions and even the more so regressions (such as the one

¹ See UNESCO (2020) *Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2020. Inclusion and Education: All Means All*, Paris, UNESCO, p. 15

English report describes) create confusion, disappoint expectations and in the end produce adverse results.

It should be added here, that as the reports state and the case studies demonstrate, the presence of reliable institutions that are committed towards inclusive education may play a really positive role towards inclusion. Such institutions mentioned in the reports are OFSTED in the UK or the Child Ombudsman in Greece (for the latter, see the Greek case study below).

B. INCLUSION

- What do we mean by the term inclusion

Inclusion as a concept should be as wide as possible: It should include all learners, regardless of identity, background or ability²

A point that was brought up in some reports was that **integration** and even more so **incorporation** into a dominant cultural paradigm is not inclusion. Inclusion recognizes and embraces diversity and difference as a resource and not as problem. In this sense the inclusive school is responsive to the diverse needs of individual learners and accepts the different cultural practices as they exist in multicultural societies as they are expressed in the school context.

- The challenges

In all the national reports, it is stated that inclusive education is an official educational goal, expressly stipulated in the curricula of all eight SOLIS countries. However, as it is explicitly or tacitly admitted in almost all reports and as is clearly stated in the bibliography curricula & laws and policies, despite their major importance in the promotion (or adversely for the obstruction) of the inclusive process, are not by themselves enough to achieve inclusion.

What should be stressed, is that inclusion is not the state but the multifaceted process, that is determined by many factors some of which we will briefly mention below:

- The school itself has to be inclusive in all aspects of its function. In other words, schools have to foster an **inclusive ethos** (an example of school with inclusive ethos, is described in Norwegian case study below).
- **The role of students is of paramount importance as they are the ones that have to embrace inclusion as an attitude towards their peers** (please see below the short section on participation).
- **The role of teachers is also very important.** An inclusive curriculum may be rendered ineffective by a prejudiced teacher who discriminates (willingly or unconsciously) between his/her students.
- Apart from willing, teachers **should be able to embrace the inclusive ethos** as a guiding principle in their teaching practice. According to some reports, (and also pointed out in the relevant bibliography), many (if not most) teachers do not have the necessary training to do so. Therefore, the need for the training of teachers is an imperative for the inclusive process (Steps taken towards this direction are mentioned in the reports in what concerns the Lithuanian and the Maltese educational systems. Also, the Italian case study describes a concerted effort towards teachers' training in inclusive education .

² See UNESCO (2020), p. 23

- The school and the students are not by themselves enough to promote an effective inclusive effort. **Parents and local communities** also have to embrace the inclusive ethos and be actively involved in the process (see the Spanish case study). Inclusion as a practice is social process and cannot be imposed from above (in this respect see the Greek case study below). In other words, **it requires a holistic approach.**

C. DIVERSITY

Inclusion, as it is already mentioned, embraces diversity. But what do we mean by the term diversity, in the context of this project? A strategy that was adopted in the reports by all partners, was to identify the groups that are more vulnerable, hence the ones that are facing the risk of exclusion. In other words, those groups for which inclusion is a desideratum.

Vulnerable groups were identified on the basis of **poverty, gender, ethnic origin (especially people with immigrant or refugee status), religion, sexual orientation or identity and disability.**

- **Poverty**

According to the European Commission³ early school leaving is often linked to poverty and unemployment. However, this issue is so complex and multidimensional that far exceeds the limits and the resources of the SOLIS project. What SOLIS can do is to help raise awareness through digital storytelling to the fact that poverty -especially in the school context- is a severe form of social exclusion.

- **Gender - Sexual Orientation - Identity**

As it is discussed in this group, schools have some responsibility to promote inclusion and this can be achieved by facilitating positive and healthy friendships. It is also mentioned how stereotypes based on gender & sexual orientation can potentially become a barrier. Specifically, we can see that the gender gap although it has been considerably bridged, still persists in many areas of the consortium countries. In this sense, exclusion can be prevented by making students aware of their rights and responsibilities (as suggested in the UK report).

- **Students of Immigrant – refugee background**

We mention this group here as immigration but also the recent influx of refugees that come from countries ridden by conflicts has changed deep seated cultural and social perceptions in European countries. From monocultural, ethnically and religiously homogenous societies they have become multicultural societies, a fact that is reflected in the composition of the school population of all the countries of the project. The challenge towards the educational inclusion of students coming from these groups has presented and still presents a challenge to the educational system of all the consortium countries. A concerted effort towards this direction becomes clear from all the reports (see for example the case study from Turkey). Nonetheless, limited resources and prejudice on the part of dominant groups (including students, policymakers, teachers, parents and local communities) are often a limiting factor.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/school/early-school-leaving_en

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

- **Disability**

Disability is one of the main factors of exclusion. The previous paradigm of segregation of special needs students is gradually being replaced by inclusive education. Although there are many obstacles in the process (prejudice, lack of resources and the need for the proper training of the teaching personnel are mentioned in the reports) the benefits of inclusive education are being realized by countries that are orienting their educational system towards an inclusive model. One major criticism that has been mentioned in two national reports (Spain & Greece) is that despite the fact that the goal of inclusive education of people with learning difficulties / disabilities is officially supported and pursued, the system remains anchored in a medical – remedial understating of disability that perceives it as a disease and not as a challenge. In this sense the goal of educational inclusion is overshadowed by a perception that views primarily the special needs students as sick people that have to be remedied and not as individuals with their own needs and talents that have to be included in the social space.

The positive role of inclusive education towards the social inclusion has been stressed among others by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in a report titled *Evidence of the Link Between Inclusive Education and Social Inclusion* (S. Symeonidou ed. 2018).

According to the report:

- Inclusive education increases the opportunities for **peer interaction** and the formation of close friendships between learners with and without disabilities.
- For social interactions to take place in inclusive settings, due consideration needs to be given to several elements that promotes learners' participation (i.e. access collaboration, recognition and acceptance).
- Learners with disabilities educated in inclusive settings may perform academically and socially better than learners in segregated settings.
- Attending and receiving support within inclusive education settings increases the likelihood of enrolment in higher education.

Although the report targets specifically students with disabilities we can say that these conclusions apply equally to all groups that are in risk of being excluded in any educational setting.

- **A short comment on bullying and exclusion**

Bullying is not per se the subject of the SOLIS project. Nonetheless it is mentioned in some of the reports **as a violent exclusionary practice**. What needs to be stressed here is that as research indicates, vulnerable students, due to disability, race or sexual orientation are more often victims of bullying. Moreover, in-group bias theory suggests that racial victimization and school bullying are closely related, with peer racial discrimination to be known as a serious form of bullying.

In stating the obvious we must mention here that bullying has no place in an inclusive school. In this sense, the inclusive ethos can be seen as a very effective anti-bullying tool.

D. PARTICIPATION

As we have already mentioned above, social interaction between peers is an essential factor for the development of the inclusive process. We have also stressed, the need for parents and local communities to be actively supportive of the inclusive process in education.

AT this point, we will make a remark on student collaboration as a process of recognition and inclusive acceptance. Learners' interaction, participation and collaboration are justifiably seen as a method through which prejudices can be successfully overcome. In this respect, student interactions should not only take place in the playground but in the classroom as well, as a means of developing soft skills that can help learners develop their personalities in a way that will help them recognize, understand and embrace diversity.

It should be noted however, and as also some of the reports show, that collaborative learning activities, although to a large extent advocated by official curricula, are left to the discretion of teachers that do not always have the necessary training to carry them through successfully.

E. GOOD PRACTICES (CASE STUDIES)

In this section we will briefly present a selection of case studies and/or good practices as reported by the SOLIS partners. The purpose of this selection is to provide the basis for an exchange of opinions on different approaches on inclusive education with the aim of helping educators from different countries to "expand their current practices in a way that could generate various improvements".

1. UK (England) A note on participatory – collaborative education

CW is a maths teacher at a Secondary School (11 to 18 years) in Leeds, with 1240 pupils on roll and rated 'good' in October 2018.

'Subjects like that are covered in PSE (personal and social education) lessons once a fortnight, RE lessons, form room (registration groups) in the morning – these are 15 minutes long. We have 'well-being Wednesdays' every week, too, **with topics that pupils do together in groups. When we discuss personal topics, the kids are very open and just accept it. They seem interested and don't seem to find it odd or embarrassing to talk about things.'**

'It's quite an affluent school – very 'white' – so multiculturalism doesn't come up much. The LGBTQ+ topic is a big one for us – I teach a pupil who chose to be non-binary for a while and now they've decided they're a boy. But he's fine about it and it makes it easier for me, remembering to say 'he' instead of 'they'. He didn't mind when I accidentally said 'bye, girls!' to them all, the wrong pronoun. It's about it being all out in the open.'

'We don't have pupils with severe disabilities, but we do have three classes with pupils mixed from our school and a nearby special school – severe learning difficulties and autism. They have a classroom base, like in a primary school, but join the rest of the school for subject lessons. Our pupils are supportive of each other, help each other out, and it's great to see it.'

'I plan lots of collaborative activities into my lessons.'

2. TURKEY – Sports education as an inclusive method

Project for Strengthening Social Cohesion with Sports for Temporary and Internationally Protected Individuals and Host Society Project

Partners; Ministry of Youth and Sports, ORF (Olympic Refuge Foundation), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), SGDD (Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants), NOC (National Olympic Committee of Turkey)

The goal of the project: Strengthening social cohesion between individuals living in Turkey country under temporary and international protection and the host society, providing access to individuals under temporary and international protection through sports activities, identifying individuals under risk, and directing them to relevant institutions that provide protection & support.

Project Activities: Sports courses in various sports branches for children aged 8-18; Awareness-raising activities on issues such as nutrition, hygiene, personal development, children's rights, child development for the families and social environments of children who will participate in sports activities; Sports festivals; Volunteer leaders' camps; Training for children and young people to acquire a sports culture and integrate with Olympic values.

Intended outcomes: At the end of the project; 7.200 children will benefit from sports activities and meet the Youth Centers on this occasion; 21,600 people will benefit from awareness-raising activities; Talented athletes will be discovered; Individuals at risk will be directed to protection services; As a result of all these activities, 43,940 people will be reached directly and 72,960 people indirectly.

3. ITALY –Teachers' training and collaborative learning

The "InterAction - Aumentare le competenze per combattere la dispersione scolastica" (InterAction - Increase skills to combat early school leaving) <https://percorsiconibambini.it/interaction/scheda-progetto/> project taking place in some neighborhoods of the city of Palermo, is aimed at combating early school leaving and dispersion through the involvement of the educating community.

Within the InterAction project, two workshops tested in three suburban schools with a high school dispersion and high levels of educational poverty met the elements of a Good Practice: "Caro Diario" (Dear Diary) and "Maestri di gioco" (Game Teachers). The two workshops involved 3 secondary schools, 2 classes, 40 students between 12-13 years old & 27 teachers. The "Maestri di gioco" workshop **aimed to providing teachers with knowledge, methods and tools to introduce play into teaching and managing relational dynamics in the classroom.**

This workshop was preparatory to the "Caro diario" workshop, which took place with the students and in the presence of the teachers.

The "Caro Diario" workshop aimed to encouraging the construction of positive relationships & **increasing the levels of participation of students in class life and activities.**

Before starting the workshop, meetings were held with the class council which pointed out various problematic elements and particular difficulties in the socialization process attributable to the "Special Educational Needs" classification of many students. These difficulties are attributable also to vulnerable socio-economic situation.

The activities were oriented towards managing one's own emotions and interpreting those of others.

4. MALTA – A comprehensive educational policy towards inclusion

The Maltese educational authorities have launched the **National Inclusive Education Framework** along with a Policy on Inclusive Education in schools in April 2019. These official documents adopt a wide definition of inclusion which **includes learners with disabilities, learners with different sexual orientation, learners from ethnic minorities and different religions and high ability learners to reflect the cohort of students at school**. Moving on to guide schools to eliminate/dissipate these barriers by allocating budgets and making plans to develop schools in a more inclusive and accessible way. The policy embraces the concept, values and principles of Inclusive Education into the realm of responding positively to all learners' diversity. It is aiming to bring together all educators and practitioners, learners, families and community members who create colleges and schools that are conducive to learning, thereby giving all learners the education they are entitled to. Examples include: "Ensuring that curriculum takes into consideration the various cultures represented in the demographics of the school community" and "understanding operation language and clear use of signs e.g. colour coding, pictograms" to name a few, which are definitely moves in the right direction.

5. NORWAY - A school with inclusive ethos

A school covering the age group of 6-16 years in the county of Innlandet, Norway, has taken a direct approach to inclusion in school – this covers all age groups, being introduced when children start at 6 years old, but is equally relevant and part of the actual school rules for older students. The school policy states that in activities, including in a social context, if 2 or more students are together, and a student who is on their own asks to join, then the group of 2 or more must say yes. There is also this equal expectation for students who are alone, that if they ask a larger group, then that group must include them. **This is an extremely direct approach to inclusion and creates a culture whereby it is natural to include everyone, no matter their background or aptitude.**

In practice this approach is seen as successful by teachers, **creating a culture of inclusion and well-being within students**, with long-lasting effects from the first years at school. This approach is more challenging for older children when in established peer groups, but the school policy is consistent across all age groups, including students 12-16 years of age. It is especially effective at reducing exclusion and bullying of younger year groups – a trend which is then carried forward.

6. LITHUANIA – Teachers' training in the inclusive ethos

The Centre of School Development in Lithuania initiated the program ***I choose to teach*** (<https://www.renkuosimokyti.lt/>). This program is a part of the international **Teach For All** Global Network. The program attracts motivated, support-oriented participants who will work in schools for two years. At the end of the program, about 70 percent participants will remain in the field of education and continue to work as teachers, school leaders, members of the academic community or educational policy. The national schools also contribute to change - together with the participants of the program, they implement change projects. This brings together a community that helps ensure the sustainability of the change. The network has as its main goals:

- Reduce social inequalities in education

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

- Create a school where every child feels respected and valued
- Develop a new approach to education and the teaching profession

One of the examples of such cooperation with the program „I choose to teach!“ is Širvintai Laurynas Stuoka-Gucevičius gymnasium. After the survey, the school encountered a problem of student engagement in the education process. The school became a participant in the program “I choose to teach” and with their help implemented a change project at the school with the aim to strengthen cooperation between school leaders, teachers, parents and students, with a particular focus on developing teachers' cooperation and leadership competencies.

7. GREECE: Prejudice and the role of the local community - Why institutions do matter

As it was mentioned above the positive role of the local community is crucial for the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children. We will see such a case as it was published in October 2015 by the Child Ombudsman's office.

The report refers to a particular case of a minority student in a primary school in Athens. The student was targeted after exhibiting a series of incidents of aggressive behavior towards his classmates. The majority of those children's parents demanded the student's exclusion or alternatively the assignment of a special educator that would undertake his support.

The representative of the child ombudsman, that was called, conducted separate meetings with the group of students, the group of parents and the educators. What was realized was that part of the problem was the tension caused by parents that interfered on a few occasions aiming at protecting their children from potentially becoming victims of school bullying, setting in that way obstacles in teachers' managing the situation effectively. Also, it was realized that many of the boy's difficulties would not be present if there was a better understanding between all parts.

The child ombudsman alongside with the school counselor, worked on limiting the tension within the parents' group and after implementing further diagnostic and counseling services inside the community promoted collaboration and succeeded a well-functioning school life.

The Greek Ombudsman, Children's Rights cycle, Mediation summary, Tackling school violence and bullying incident, G.Moschos-M.Tsagkari, October 2015

8. SPAIN – Involving communities in the educational process

“Patios Inclusivos” is a project designed and aimed to transform the playground and recreational places of schools into inclusive spaces that promote inclusivity. The project plan is divided in different steps that will end up with results that are available for future use after the project ends. The project starts with an initial evaluation to see where the current situation in terms of inclusivity is and what the ideal situation would be. The project created a commission formed by different groups of students, family, teachers and directive board members. This commission aimed to meet and design project activities with the purpose of creating an inclusive space in the playground areas of schools. There was a representation of all groups of people involved in a school to allow for a true reflection of all the individual points of view that inclusivity has within a school.

“Patios Inclusivos” shares a lot of information about what a playground should be in order to be inclusive. The project gives support for schools to help them become inclusive by giving teachers and educational staff resources to promote this. One of the most important valuable

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication (communication) reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

key aspects that this project includes is that it values the importance of all members in order to achieve real inclusivity. It looks at all the sides of inclusion and how everyone can help for inclusion.

F. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION – THE RELEVANCE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Digital storytelling is a form of media through which people can describe a situation or experience. Through it, the thoughts, emotions and experiences of the storyteller can be expressed in an authentic way. The SOLIS project has been developed on the assumption that digital storytelling can play a significant role in raising awareness and preventing students' exclusion, when utilized within the school setting. This could be achieved either by embedding it in existing practices or by creating new ones that would bring the digital storytelling tool in the heart of it.