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**Inclusive Education
for All Needs:
European Sectoral
Social Partners
in Education
Promoting
Inclusion of
Persons with
Special Needs in
Education**

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of recent socio-economic, humanitarian, climate and health crises, the provision of **a quality, inclusive education for all** has become a key concern for national policymakers, international organisations, and wider civil society (e.g. UNESCO, 2021). Nonetheless, despite broad political consensus, and prior evidence of movement towards the full participation of all children and young people in mainstream education, the implementation of inclusion in practice can be difficult. Although human diversity is a defining feature of modern societies, meeting the educational needs of students with different personal characteristics, social and cultural backgrounds, academic interests and life experiences poses significant challenges to education systems (Ydesen et al., 2022).

Inclusion has historically been associated with providing access to education for students with special educational needs and disabilities. However, following the widespread adoption of the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practices in Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), and the subsequent United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; United Nations, 2006), an important paradigm shift occurred. Contemporary understandings of inclusion are now grounded in **the social and human rights models of disability** and emphasise the removal of barriers to learning and participation for all students (Ainscow, 2005).

Despite international agreements, progress on inclusion has been limited (UNESCO, 2020). This is partly due to the numerous national and local interpretations of inclusion (Hardy and Woodcock, 2015), which reflect different understandings of the purpose of education (Schuelka and Engsig, 2020) as well as historical, cultural and institutional norms surrounding disability and difference in society. The complexity of inclusion is further compounded by the unequal distribution of educational funding, services and opportunities, which often places the most vulnerable students, particularly those with



special educational needs and disabilities, at increased risk of exclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive education represents a significant professional undertaking for education personnel, who are required to meet the complex learning needs of all students despite limited financial, professional and material resources. Indeed, public expenditure on education across Europe has declined significantly in real terms over the past two decades (OECD, 2023). Moreover, the implementation of the inclusion agenda is unfolding amid a growing teacher recruitment and retention crisis in education, which restricts students' access to qualified teachers and education support personnel. This situation places additional burdens on those who continue to work in the profession, often without the specialised expertise needed to support the specific needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities. These challenges can have significant implications for the quality of educational provision, as well as for education professionals' own sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction and wellbeing (e.g. OECD, 2025).

Nonetheless, inclusive education extends beyond the provision of learning opportunities for students. There is increasing recognition that the entire school community should reflect the full spectrum of human diversity in society, and that this cannot occur without the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities. Yet, despite their potential contribution to inclusive pedagogies, equality and anti-discrimination in education, **teachers with disabilities often face significant barriers to their professional entry and career progression** (e.g. Neca et al, 2022).

Systemic and institution-level challenges to inclusive education, particularly regarding the full participation of persons with special educational needs and disabilities, underline the need for a strategic, coordinated response by education social partners at both the national and European levels. In this regard, the European Commission has

highlighted the importance of social dialogue to the development and implementation of policy reforms which are appropriate to stakeholders' needs (European Commission, 2016). However, previous research indicates that the scale and scope of social dialogue could be improved. A major concern identified in studies conducted for the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) is that social partners do not always consider non-industrial issues, such as professional development policies, within the framework of social dialogue (e.g. Stevenson et al., 2018; Stevenson and Milner, 2023). It is therefore essential to understand whether and, if so, how inclusive education in general – and the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in particular – is addressed through mechanisms of social dialogue.

In this report, we present the findings from research conducted for the project ***Inclusive Education for All Needs: European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Promoting Inclusion of Persons with Special Needs in Education***. The project was funded by the European Commission and carried out through a partnership between ETUCE, EFEE and Aalborg University, Denmark. The research involved desk research, an online survey and focus group interviews with education social partners during study visits to Solingen, Germany, and Bucharest, Romania (see Appendix A for a more detailed description of the research methodology). It focused on three key thematic areas:

1. Understandings of, and approaches to, the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in education policy and practice
2. Professional challenges to the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities
3. Social dialogue on the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in education

Use of terminology

At this stage, it is important to clarify some complex issues related to the use of terminology in an international, comparative research project. In the introduction, we have referred to persons with “special educational needs”. Although this term is widely used in education policy and practice across Europe to describe the educational provisions required by specific children and young people, it is not without controversy. We therefore do not use it uncritically. Indeed, while considered a euphemism, the term reinforces the medical model of disability, based on “within-person” deficits (Shakespeare, 2006). This framing can undermine inclusive pedagogies and legitimise segregation (Slee, 2011), affecting students’ sense of belonging.

In line with the UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006), and the social and human rights models of disability (Lawson and Beckett, 2020; Oliver, 2013), many Anglophone scholars and disability activists prefer the terms persons with disabilities (person-first) or disabled persons (identity-first). These respectively foreground the person before the disability and acknowledge that disability does not reside within the individual but results from the interaction between an impairment or condition and the physical environment or societal attitudes (Lawson and Beckett, 2020; Oliver, 2013). **Their use shifts the focus from individual ‘needs’ to individual rights.**

For this research project, we faced the challenge of employing concepts that would be understandable across multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. Given its widespread use in policy and practice across the European Union (and by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education), we have chosen to employ the term “special educational needs” in relation to students only. When referring to the education workforce, we use *education personnel with disabilities* or *teachers with disabilities*.

Structure of the report

In **Chapter 2**, we analyse the concept of inclusive education in general and with particular reference to the inclusion of persons with special education needs and disabilities. We then explore the issues related to the inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities and the specific challenges experienced by education personnel. Following this, we examine the issues related to the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities.

In **Chapter 3**, we explore how inclusive education might be considered an issue for, and addressed through, social dialogue. We highlight the various social dialogue mechanisms and how these could provide different opportunities to promote inclusive education and employment.

In **Chapter 4**, we examine the organisational and inter-organisational patterns of actions on inclusive education and employment. This involves analysis of the results of an online survey which was distributed to ETUCE and EFEE member organisations.

In **Chapter 5**, we present the case study for the study visit to Solingen, Germany. This case study is based on an extensive literature review of academic research and policy documents and a focus group interview with education social partners.

In **Chapter 6**, we present the case study for the study visit to Bucharest, Romania. This case study is based on an extensive literature review of academic research and policy documents and a focus group interview with education social partners.

In **Chapter 7**, we present our final conclusions and recommendations based on the research.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: REMOVING BARRIERS FOR ALL

2.1. Introduction

Inclusive education is important to the creation of inclusive and democratic societies, “where differences of opinion can be freely expressed and where the wide range of voices can be heard, in pursuit of social cohesion and in celebration of diversity” (UNESCO, 2020, p.v). Therefore, a key aim of the global inclusion agenda is to ensure that every student feels valued, respected and a genuine sense of belonging – both within the educational community and society – regardless of differences in gender, socio-economic background, ability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion (UNESCO, 2020; Ydesen et al., 2022).

Although inclusive education policies concern all children and young people (United Nations, n.d.), the global policy agenda has largely been shaped by the historical struggle for the rights of people with disabilities. Yet, despite the commitments to education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; United Nations, 2006), and the fact that disability access informs most national and regional inclusion laws, **students with special educational needs and disabilities remain most vulnerable to exclusion**. When needs and disabilities intersect with other characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity and immigrant status, their marginalisation can be amplified (UNESCO, 2020).

Nonetheless, the inclusive vision encompasses more than students. Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that inclusive education cannot be achieved without the participation of teachers, school leaders and education support personnel with disabilities. **However, disability representation in the education workforce remains low, and education personnel with disabilities face considerable obstacles to professional entry** (e.g. Neca et al., 2022). This is despite evidence that teachers with disabilities can make a unique contribution, both to inclusive



pedagogies in their classrooms and to broader understandings of disability equality and anti-discrimination among students, parents and colleagues (e.g. Duquette, 2000; Valle et al., 2004).

In the following two sections, we draw on international policy documents and academic research to review some of the dilemmas, tensions, and challenges associated with the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in schools and systems. In the first section, we explore the philosophical background to inclusive education and key historical and contemporary policy developments. In the second section, we examine the concept of inclusive employment, with a particular analytical focus on teachers with disabilities. In both sections, we include references to international policy frameworks and European Union (EU) comparative data. To conclude, we evaluate the implications for policy and practice.

2.2. Inclusive Education for All

2.2.1. From Segregation to Inclusion in Mainstream Education

Inclusive education has been a priority on the global policy agenda since 1994, when the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) was ratified by representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organisations. While its title suggested a principal focus on special education, the core message of the Salamanca Statement advanced a broader, more comprehensive understanding of inclusion. This, in turn, facilitated a paradigm shift from a deficit-oriented discourse in special education to a more inclusive approach grounded in the principles of universalism, social justice and

equity for all learners (Ainscow, et al., 2019; Spandagou, 2021).

The Salamanca Statement marked the start of a transition away from the differentiation and segregation of students with special educational needs and disabilities in separate educational units (Hamre, 2018). **However, inclusion today is not merely about access to mainstream education; it is concerned with the active removal of barriers to a quality education for all** (Ainscow, 2005). In this context, schools must identify any obstacles to learning, participation and achievement to ensure that all children and young people have high-quality educational experiences and outcomes (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive education therefore demands an approach which acknowledges student diversity from the outset; social structures – classrooms, schools, and communities – and socio-educational practices should be designed to include all students, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. As emphasised in the Salamanca Statement:

The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 7)

Following the Salamanca Statement, education policymakers did begin to adopt a broader vision of inclusion which encompassed, but extended beyond, provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream education. Nonetheless, given the substantial investment required, it is perhaps unsurprising that schools have struggled to achieve its aims. Indeed, special education schools remain a core feature of education systems across Europe (UNESCO, 2020), and **even where children with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream education, considerable gaps in inclusive provision remain** (Drál and Lenárt, 2025).

The limited implementation of inclusive education – both in its broadest sense and particularly in relation to students with special educational needs and disabilities – can be attributed to several key factors. First, inclusive education is conceptualised and implemented differently at the national level (Engsig and Johnstone, 2015). Second, despite the continued focus on the integration of students with special educational needs and disabilities into mainstream classrooms (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014), educational experiences can be affected by societal and institutional discrimination, such as ableism, as well as by neoliberal discourses which promote narrow views of educational achievement based on academic performance and labour market outcomes (Liasidou, 2012). Third, and linked to the two preceding points, **inclusive education for students with special educational needs and disabilities is hindered by historical and cultural understandings of disability, which continue to reinforce education policies and practices of segregation.** These understandings can be used to discriminate against specific communities of people; for example, Roma children are more likely to be segregated and placed in special schools (UNESCO, 2020). Such prejudice persists despite attempts in policy reforms and activist campaigns to shift interpretations of disability from a deficit within the individual to a social construction.

2.2.2. From the Medical Model to the Social and Human Rights Model of Disability

As noted in the previous section, disability was historically understood to be a problem located within the individual, namely, their functional limitations. Consequently, early approaches to disability were informed by either the charity model or **the medical model of disability**, which positioned disabled people as ‘victims’ or in need of medical intervention respectively.

The medical model continues to dominate disability statistics, which tend to focus on whether people have or do not have specific impairments, diseases or conditions. This reinforces stereotypical perceptions of people with disabilities – for example, as a ‘wheelchair-user’ or as deaf or blind (UNICEF, 2020). Moreover, **it overlooks the complexity of disability, which can be temporary or permanent, visible or non-visible, diverse, intersectional and situational** (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Since the 1980s, **the social model of disability** has been the most influential framework. This emerged from the 1970s disability rights movement as a response to the medical model. In essence, it distinguishes between the biological condition (impairment) and the social condition (disability), arguing that **people are not disabled by their impairments but by the attitudinal and physical barriers they face in society** – for example, inaccessible buildings, prejudice and social stigma. The model also recognises that these barriers may change for individuals over time (Oliver, 2013). As noted by the World Health Organisation: “Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life” (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Disability is therefore understood as a socially constructed oppression that prevents individuals from achieving their full potential.

However, the barriers to participation can be challenged and removed through transformative social change. Ultimately, the social model reinforces the idea that systems must adapt to the individual (Oliver, 2013).

The social model has been highly influential in international treaties such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006). It has also been used to support arguments against segregated special education. However, the social model has been criticised. Some argue that it downplays the role of impairment and ignores the intersection of disability with other characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity. Equally, others suggest that it fails to account for the varying effects of different disabilities on different individuals and, consequently, their diverse needs. Finally, while helping to identify where policies could remove barriers to inclusion, it has limited utility as an evaluative framework (Lawson and Beckett, 2020).

A more useful tool for evaluation is the human rights model of disability. This model is also grounded in the disability rights movement, and embedded within human

rights law and policy, it has been increasingly applied since the adoption of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006). The human rights model focuses on the inherent dignity of the human being and, if necessary, their medical characteristics. **It positions the individual at the centre of all decisions affecting them and locates the ‘problem’ of disability within society.** While sharing some similarities with the social model, the human rights model is often used to monitor national efforts to implement the UN CRPD and, as such, can provide a roadmap for policy development (Lawson and Beckett, 2020).

There is a view that the human rights model extends upon and improves the social model. However, Lawson and Beckett (2020) argue that the two models are in fact complementary. Indeed, **both could be used to enhance social justice for disabled people in education and employment.** Nonetheless, these scholars argue that it is important to select the best tool for the task (see Table 1 for a summary). A key difference between the two is that the social model creates categories of “disabled” and “non-disabled”. Thus, according to Lawson and Beckett (2020),

Table 1. Using the Social and Human Rights Models of Disability

Social model	Human rights model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model of disability • Can be adapted to different locations • Can identify where policy reform is needed • Creates categories of disabled and non-disabled • Solidarity: shared experience of disablement and resistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model of disability policy • Codified in UN CRPD, frameworks and legislation • Provides a blueprint for progress on law and policy • Brings disabled and non-disabled people together in wider human rights movement • Solidarity: shared sense of humanity and commitment to change based on respect for difference and dignity

From Lawson and Beckett (2020)

solidarity is generated by a shared experience of disablement caused by exclusionary structures, attitudes and practices and by a shared commitment to resistance and social change. By contrast, the human rights model positions disabled people as **'rights holders'** and seeks to unite them with non-disabled people as part of a wider human rights movement. Solidarity is therefore generated by a shared sense of humanity and a shared commitment to positive social change, enabling individual flourishing **based on respect for human difference and individual dignity** (Lawson and Beckett, 2020).

2.2.3. Defining Needs: The Importance of Language

Children and young people with disabilities can be categorised as having “special educational needs” (also referred to as special education needs, special needs or SEN). However, as highlighted in the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, **“not all children with disabilities have special education needs, nor do all children with special education needs have a disability”** (UNESCO, 2020 p.74). Indeed, special needs identification is noted to be a “distinct issue from disability measurement and with less consensus” (UNESCO, 2020, p.74).

The percentage of students identified as having special educational needs varies across Europe. For example, according to a 2025 report for the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, the identification rate of children/learners with an official decision of SEN varied between 20.23% in Lithuania and 2.13% in Luxembourg in primary education (ISCED 1) and between 16.99% in Belgium (Flemish Community) and 1.43% in Luxembourg in lower secondary education (ISCED 2) (Drál and Lenárt, 2025). The variation can be explained in part by different constructions of this category of education (UNESCO, 2020). While some education systems, such as those in Belgium

(Flemish Community) and Sweden, focus on disability and more medical understandings of special educational needs, others take account of students' additional learning needs. Notably, Portugal abandoned this system of categorisation in 2018, replacing the term with “students in need of educational support measures” (OECD, 2023). Regardless of the approach, **“special educational needs” is considered a vague and general definition.**

Despite its limitations, the designation of special educational needs **shifts the focus from a perceived deficit within the child to the provision of support required.** In this respect, national definitions are central to identification procedures guided by legislation and grounded in administrative regulations (Norwich, 2016).

It is widely acknowledged that **early identification is critical** to addressing students' needs and ensuring timely and appropriate educational support (UNESCO, 2020). Most countries have a two-part identification process: a so-called diagnostic-education programme planning model (Peters, 2003). This process first requires a diagnosis of the disorder or condition (e.g. autism) to determine whether a student is entitled to additional or specialised resources. Following a positive diagnosis, an individual educational programme is developed (Norwich, 2016).

Although parents recognise that assessment can secure entitlement to disability benefits, **the identification of need can contribute to stigma** (Norwich, 2016). Certain groups may also be overrepresented among those identified as needing special education due to inherent biases in the assessment procedures, materials or those conducting the assessments. For example, children with immigrant backgrounds can be misdiagnosed as having specific learning difficulties when literacy tests are not available in their first language (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, a formal diagnosis often provides **no guidance on how to work with children with special educational needs.** Indeed, assessments focus

on the individual student and are generally conducted outside teaching and learning contexts (Norwich, 2016).

The use of the term “special educational needs” is problematic on several levels. Booth and Ainscow (2006) note that the category can incorporate a broad range of students, and that a child classified as having special needs in one country might not be classified similarly in another. Consequently, research needs to focus on understanding the educational provisions for *all* children: who is included, who is excluded, and on what basis (Booth and Ainscow, 2006).

Ultimately, **the use of the term “special educational needs” can inadvertently lead to exclusions** (Slee, 2011). While often considered a euphemism, it may have harmful effects on the individual (Gernsbacher et al., 2009). Moreover, in reinforcing the medical model (Shakespeare, 2006), it frames the child as the problem – as requiring “special” treatment. The identification of “special needs” can therefore be stigmatising and even lead to lower academic expectations (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009). Consequently, scholars and disability activists have challenged the use of this category, arguing that individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties do not have “needs”; **they have rights** (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006; see also United Nations, 2006).

2.2.4. Inclusive Leadership: How School Leaders Create Belonging

Although understandings of inclusion differ, research consistently highlights that **school leaders play a crucial role in implementing inclusive policies and practices** (e.g. Esposito et al., 2019; Greany et al., 2023; Ydesen et al., 2022). Indeed, an inclusive school ethos, which values diversity and supports the needs of all students, depends on effective and supportive school leadership (UNESCO, 2020, 2024, 2025a).

Yet, school leaders’ efforts to promote inclusive education do not operate in isolation. The wider social and cultural context can influence how vulnerable populations are treated and affect school ethos (UNESCO, 2024, 2025a). In this regard, **education legislation and policies that prioritise inclusion can support school leaders’ work**. Indeed, in certain Central and Eastern Europe Member States, the deinstitutionalisation of special schools and the transition to a rights-based approach to inclusive education were driven by EU accession as well as commitments to the Salamanca Statement, the UN CRPD, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2025a).

Nevertheless, **governance structures and systems can inhibit school leaders’ practices and effectiveness**: those with less autonomy are less able to adapt financial and human resources to school needs and foster inclusive environments. For example, in Albania, school leaders lack the autonomy to determine school budgets and adjust school plans and operations. By contrast, in Slovenia, certain municipalities grant school leaders greater autonomy than others, with some allocating funding for specific purposes (UNESCO, 2025a). **Lack of autonomy over teacher recruitment poses particular challenges**; while critical for establishing an inclusive culture and building capacity (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018), such decisions are sometimes made at higher levels of the education system (UNESCO, 2025a).

2.2.5. Patterns of Disability Inclusion in Education across the European Union

In 2024, approximately 107 million EU citizens aged 16 and over (23.9%) experienced some form of disability¹ (Eurostat, 2025a). With nearly one quarter of the EU population on average experiencing a degree of activity limitation, **there is a clear imperative to make inclusion a priority**. However, despite the development of numerous legislative and policy instruments at Member State level, which align with the UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006), people with disabilities continue to face considerable barriers to their full participation in society (European Commission, 2021). In education specifically, considerable gaps persist between the outcomes of students with and without disabilities. Below, we highlight some headline figures.

First, **people with disabilities are more likely to leave education and training earlier than persons without disabilities**. In 2024, 24.6% of people aged 18 to 24 with a disability (some or severe activity limitation) were early leavers from education and training, compared to 8.0% of those without a disability. This figure was even higher for people with a severe disability (44.2%). Although the data are somewhat unreliable, there is considerable between-country variation: Romania (61.6%) and Greece (58.8%²) had the two highest rates and Finland (10.7%) and Sweden (13.1%) the two lowest rates of early leavers (Eurostat, 2025b).

Second, **people with disabilities are more likely to be neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) than those without disabilities**. In 2024, 29.8% of young people aged 15 to 29 with a disability were

classified as NEETs, compared with 10.0% of their peers without a disability. Again, the figure was even higher for people with a severe disability (54.7%). Moreover, country-level analysis reveals that Bulgaria (86.6%³) and Greece (79.0%⁴) had the two highest rates and Sweden (14.5%) and the Netherlands (16.7%) the two lowest rates (Eurostat, 2025c).

Finally, and perhaps not unexpected given the above data, **people with disabilities are less likely to achieve a high level of educational attainment than those without disabilities**. In 2024, 26.1% of people aged 30 to 54 with disabilities had a tertiary level education, compared with 41.1% of those without disabilities. The figure is 18.0% for people with a severe disability. Furthermore, Romania (5.1%) and Italy (11.1%) had the lowest rates of tertiary level education and Ireland (40.4%) and Luxembourg (39.8%) the highest rates (Eurostat, 2025b).

These figures highlight **the need to strengthen the human rights model of disability in education at Member State level**. However, education systems are currently under considerable pressure, which affects efforts to provide a quality education for all learners, not just the most vulnerable.

2.2.6. The Systemic Challenges to Inclusive Education

As the previous section demonstrates, **EU Member States need to do more to deliver on the inclusive education agenda, particularly for students with special educational needs and disabilities**. This is by no means an easy task. Across Europe and beyond, the public education sector has faced significant challenges in response to various economic, geopolitical, humanitarian and

1 Self-reported data based on general, long-standing limitations in usual activities due to health problems.
2 Break in time series, low reliability

3 Break in time series, low reliability
4 Break in time series

health crises (e.g. OECD, 2013; Stevenson et al., 2017). These challenges have undoubtedly affected the capacity of education systems – and the teaching profession in particular – to meet the diverse needs of all students (UNESCO, 2020, 2021). In addition to these global and regional pressures, there is also **a crisis within the teaching profession itself** (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

In this section, we attempt to unpick some of the systemic barriers at the national level. To better understand the issues, we draw on data from European and international reports. In doing so, we acknowledge that there are significant differences between education systems, not only in how special educational needs are understood, identified and diagnosed but also in how education policies respond to those needs, for example, through segregated special education units or classes. While quantitative comparisons can only provide limited insights, the data do give an indication of the depth and complexity of the challenges.

1) Teacher supply crisis

Despite the critical role of teachers in advancing the inclusion agenda, **education systems across the global are currently facing a significant recruitment and retention crisis** (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education, 2024). In the most recent Teacher and Learning International Survey (hereafter TALIS 2024) report (OECD, 2025), around one in five lower secondary teachers in mainstream schools reported that teacher shortages are having **an impact on the quality of instruction**. The problem is particularly acute in Latvia and the Netherlands, where approximately half of teachers reported this as an issue. While an EU-wide analysis is not yet available, the 2023 Education and Training Monitoring Report did highlight similar issues; 24 EU Member States reported problems with insufficient teacher supply, and, with ageing teacher populations,

the problem is predicted to worsen (European Commission, 2023a).

While teachers are frequently regarded as the cornerstone of education (UNESCO, 2021), education support personnel – professional, administrative and technical staff including teaching assistants, school nurses, educational psychologists – are also vital to promoting a safe, healthy and positive learning environment (Education International, 2025). Education support personnel also play an important role in supporting students at tertiary level (UNESCO, 2020). Nonetheless, in TALIS 2024, nearly one third of lower secondary teachers (31%) reported **a shortage of education support staff**; in Austria, Belgium (French Community), Italy and Spain, over 50% of respondents worked in schools where this was an issue (OECD, 2025c). These findings are supported by studies commissioned by Education International (e.g. Arnold and Rahimi, 2024; Cone and Giudici, 2024). Overall, **staff shortages are more prevalent in publicly managed schools than in privately managed schools** (OECD, 2025).

Faced with workforce shortfalls, school leaders are increasingly relying on **unqualified and underqualified teachers** (International Labour Organisation, 2024a) and **agency staff** (e.g. Camphuijsen, M., and Stolp, 2022 on the Netherlands) to fill gaps. The teacher crisis undoubtedly limits the capacity of EU Member States to provide a quality, inclusive and equitable education for all. Therefore, the attractiveness of the teaching profession cannot be considered a discrete policy problem; rather, **it is central to broader concerns over equity and quality in education**.

2) Teachers professional learning needs

According to TALIS 2024, just under half of teachers (45%) work in schools where more than 10% of students are categorised as having special educational needs. This represents an increase of 15% on average since 2018. However, there is some between-

country variation; in France and the Netherlands, more than seven in ten work in such schools (OECD, 2025).

Although national definitions of special educational needs may differ, **student diversity has huge implications for teachers' professional development needs**. Indeed, the report identifies a widespread shortage of teachers with the competences to teach students with special educational needs. In Belgium (French Community), Estonia and the Netherlands, at least half of teachers worked in schools where this was considered a challenge (OECD, 2025).

According to TALIS 2024, **one in four teachers has a high level of need for professional development in teaching students with special educational needs**, an increase since 2018. In fact, this was the second most commonly reported area of professional development need (OECD, 2025). Notably, the 2020 Global Education Monitoring report emphasises that strengthening professional development in inclusive education is essential if teachers are to become change agents equipped with the values, knowledge and skills to enable every child to succeed. While instruction, classroom management, inter-professional collaboration and assessment methods are noted to be key areas for development, the report suggests that professional learning must be “relevant to teachers’ needs, cover multiple aspects of inclusive teaching for all learners, and include follow-up support to help teachers integrate new skills into classroom practices” (UNESCO, 2020, p.141; see also European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2010, 2015). Networks between teachers in different schools (mainstream and special education) can also be opportunities to share knowledge and practices. Ultimately, **inclusive approaches need to be embedded as a core component of teacher education**, rather than treated as a specialist topic or module focused on special education or a particular disability (UNESCO, 2020; see also Rouse and Florian, 2012; Woodcock and

Hardy, 2017). Educational support personnel should also have access to quality professional development (UNESCO, 2020).

3) Education funding systems and governance structures

The inclusive education agenda cannot be implemented successfully without adequate public funding to ensure that resources match the needs of all students. The 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report reveals that governments adopt various approaches to education financing; policies may direct funding towards schools or local authorities or target support to students and their families. Additional funding streams, such as social protection programmes, can also contribute to the inclusion of marginalised groups, while funding formulas can enhance equitable access to tertiary education. Beyond education financing, teachers are important resources; however, **the distribution of qualified and experienced teachers across education systems is unequal** (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive education involves additional costs in both special and mainstream settings, and these costs are rising as more students are identified as having special educational needs. Moreover, resources and services for students with disabilities are often limited and unevenly distributed, especially in low- and middle-income countries. However, the extent of these issues is not fully known; there is limited reliable data on school financing, the allocation of resources to special and inclusive settings, and how spending is distributed for general and specific uses (UNESCO, 2020).

The 2020 GEM report recommends that governments adopt a **more equitable twin-track approach** “that allocates general funding to foster an inclusive learning environment for all learners, as well as targeted funding to follow the furthest behind as early as possible” (UNESCO, 2020, p.20). Without investment, teachers question the feasibility of inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

The 2020 GEM report further underlines **the importance of integrated services and provision** for achieving educational equity. This means that “responsibilities for delivering inclusive education need to be shared horizontally among government departments or government and non-government actors, as well as vertically across education or government levels, taking their respective advantages into account” (UNESCO, 2020, p.90). However, the division of labour between different levels of governance can lead to variable access to, and quality of, education provision and services (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016). Indeed, the GEM report highlights issues such as the lack of a shared vision, ineffective communication, and limited local capacities, all of which can undermine the implementation of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020).

2.2.7. The Impact of the Inclusion Agenda on Education Personnel

1) Teacher self-efficacy in the context of competing educational agendas

Inclusion is just one agenda on the broader global education policy landscape. Alongside the pedagogical challenge of addressing human diversity, teachers and school leaders are also tasked with evaluating the extent to which children and young people have retained, understood and applied their knowledge. Over the past two decades, **the global assessment agenda** has had a significant influence on national education reforms.

Assessment⁵ – like inclusion – has different meanings in different contexts but is generally associated with the gathering of evidence to “make a judgement” (Stobart, 2008,

⁵ It can be used interchangeably with the concepts of evaluation, testing and examinations.

p.5) Both agendas are ultimately based on cultural decisions regarding “what and who is to be assessed/included, how to assess/include, and what the implications should be in terms of policy and practice” (Ydesen et al., 2022, p.3). Despite these similarities, the two agendas are not always aligned. While inclusive education seeks to move beyond the hierarchisation and categorisation of students, educational assessment tends to do the opposite, emphasising standardisation over diversity and positioning students on a continuum of attainment from poor to excellent. In this way, **assessment has historically functioned as a mechanism to govern access to, and exclusion from, education, employment and broader society** (Ydesen et al., 2022).

Implementation of the inclusion and assessment agendas has **a direct impact on teacher self-efficacy**. In TALIS 2024, a large majority of lower secondary teachers (approximately 70%) reported that they could collaborate with other professionals and staff to teach students with special educational needs (OECD, 2025). However, only four in ten felt confident adapting standardised assessments for students with special educational needs, and this challenge was even evident in schools with a higher proportion of such students (OECD, 2025).

2) Artificial intelligence: a resource for special education and a risk for inclusion

As noted already, teachers have adopted **collaborative practices** to address the challenges of inclusion. TALIS 2024 also highlighted teachers’ various **pedagogical adaptations** to support students with disabilities and learning difficulties. One key finding was that teachers with a higher percentage of students with special educational needs (above 30%) were more likely to focus practices on the development of students’ social and emotional skills (OECD, 2025).

A more significant pedagogical adaptation concerns the use of digital technologies and

artificial intelligence (AI). TALIS 2024 reveals that teachers with a higher percentage of students with special educational needs were also **more likely to use digital tools for individualised instruction and assessment**. Moreover, in nearly half of the education systems with data available for primary and secondary education, a larger proportion of primary teachers used AI to support students with special educational needs and adjust the difficulty of learning materials (OECD, 2025).

Artificial intelligence in education (AIEd) is a rapidly expanding phenomenon. Indeed, ETUCE and EFEE member organisations interviewed for this research project highlighted its potential to support students with special educational needs and disabilities (see survey results and case studies). Nevertheless, the full impact of current and future AI applications remains unclear.

In a working paper for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Linsenmayer (2025) examines how **AI can support students with specific learning difficulties** (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia), sensory, speech and/or physical impairments, and neurodevelopmental conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She argues that AI may offer additional opportunities to identify dyslexic tendencies and adapt both learning content and delivery to individual students. To support this claim, she highlights various tools currently in use or under development that support reading, provide individualised support, provide feedback and recommend teaching strategies.

At the same time, however, Linsenmayer (2025) highlights **major ethical concerns related to privacy and security**, particularly for students with special educational needs who may lack the capacity to provide informed consent. Furthermore, she emphasises the risk of **algorithmic biases**, which can lead to inaccurate predictions of needs and reinforce inequalities and

discrimination against marginalised groups, including people with disabilities. Indeed, vulnerability to bias can be increased when special educational needs intersect with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic background (see also Varisk and Gorochovskij, 2023; Whittaker et al., 2019). Finally, a key concern is the risk of **techno-ableism** which is defined as “the assumption that technology should render individuals able-bodied and neurotypical” (Linsenmayer, 2025, p.32; see also Shew, 2020). This can promote a harmful understanding of disability among students, adversely affecting their inclusion in education and beyond. Ultimately, Linsenmayer (2025) emphasises **the need to engage individuals with special educational needs in the development and evaluation of digital tools** to ensure these tools reflect their diverse needs.

TALIS 2024 does not report on *why* teachers are using artificial intelligence. However, teachers have highlighted lack of time as a major constraint in their work overall, and particularly when supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities. Equally, classroom conditions – such as large class sizes – make it difficult for teachers to provide one-on-one support to the most vulnerable students (Ydesen et al., 2022). According to TALIS 2024, primary teachers reported fewer challenges with AI than secondary teachers, for example, recommendations which may not be correct or amplify biases (OECD, 2025). However, it is unclear whether this indicates a higher level of AI literacy or a greater reliance on digital tools when, due to time pressures, convenience might take precedence over critical considerations of credibility and equity.

3) Teachers’ working conditions and wellbeing in inclusive schools

According to TALIS 2024, adapting teaching to students’ diverse learning needs – not academic differences – has a **significant impact on teachers’ wellbeing**. More than one third (37%) of teachers on average

reported this as a **source of stress**, rising to more than 50% in Lithuania, Norway, Portugal and Sweden (OECD, 2025). One major issue for inclusion in this regard is **high pupil-teacher ratios** (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, teachers were increasingly likely to report stress related to **classroom discipline** when student diversity involved behavioural, linguistic or special educational needs (however, no link was observed in Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden). The inclusion of students with special educational needs could potentially be associated with higher administrative workloads, increased communication with parents or guardians, and a heightened sense of responsibility for students' emotional and social wellbeing, all of which are deemed additional sources of stress for teachers (OECD, 2025).

A closer examination of the TALIS 2024 data reveals that certain groups of teachers experience greater challenges to their wellbeing. **Younger teachers (under 30)** are more likely to work in the most diverse classrooms with students who have special educational needs and/or language or behavioural difficulties. In some contexts (e.g. Italy, Latvia and Portugal), these students represent up to one fifth of the classroom composition. In the Netherlands, 73% of younger teachers reported having classes with a high proportion of students with special educational needs, compared with only 19% of older teachers. While some differences might reflect systemic approaches to inclusion, **the uneven distribution of students with special educational needs between new and more experienced teachers is a major equity issue**. Novice teachers need time to develop their expertise. Without sufficient professional guidance and support to work effectively with students with more complex needs, these working conditions could negatively affect their job satisfaction, wellbeing and retention (OECD, 2025).

2.3. Inclusive Employment for All

2.3.1. Inclusive Employment in Europe

According to Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), State Parties must “recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities” (United Nations, 2006). To promote disability inclusion in employment, including for those who acquire a disability during their employment, State Parties should implement legislation that: prohibits discrimination in recruitment, career progression and working conditions; protects the rights of persons with disabilities to equal opportunities, remuneration, and a safe and healthy work environment; ensures their labour and trade union rights on an equal basis with others; promotes their employment in the public sector; ensures the provision of reasonable accommodations in the workplace; and promotes retention and return-to-work programmes (United Nations, 2006).

The European Commission Disability Employment Package supports Member States to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy social inclusion and economic autonomy through employment. This initiative forms part of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 and aligns with the UN CRPD. Despite these measures, only 50% of the 42.8 million working-age persons with disabilities in the EU are employed. Increasing their employment rate and reducing the employment gap is therefore crucial to achieving the 2030 headline targets on employment (European Commission, n.d.). Equality of opportunity in employment is often measured through **the disability**

employment gap – the difference between the employment rate of people with disabilities and that of people without disabilities. Across the EU27, the disability employment gap⁶ in 2024 was 24%, with significantly higher gaps in Ireland (38.2%), Croatia (41.0%), Lithuania (39.9%) and Romania (44.8%). In the same year, nearly twice as many 15- to 64-year-olds with disabilities (9.5%) were unemployed compared with those without disabilities (5.9%). This group was also more likely to experience long-term unemployment⁷, with 40.6% of unemployed persons with disabilities in long-term unemployment compared to 31.1% of their non-disabled counterparts (Eurostat, 2025e).

2.3.2. Inclusive Employment in Education

Since the adoption and endorsement of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), national governments have demonstrated strong commitments to including all children and young people in mainstream schools, particularly those defined as having special educational needs or disabilities (UNESCO, 2017, 2020). By contrast, **the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities has received far less attention**. Low disability representation in higher education, combined with the omission of disability considerations from national teacher policy, has undoubtedly influenced the underrepresentation of education personnel with disabilities within the education workforce (Sidhal et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2020). It has also impacted the research data available (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024), limiting understanding of the lived experiences of teachers with disabilities and, thus, the capacity to develop evidence-informed policies that promote their inclusion (Sidhal et al., 2024).

The apparent lack of political interest has occurred despite the fact that **both the Salamanca Statement and the UN CRPD underline the importance of recruiting teachers with disabilities**, recognising their ability to support inclusive practices (e.g. Braille and sign language) and serve as role models for students with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). Indeed, there has been a growing consensus among academics and international policymakers that inclusive education should extend beyond student participation (e.g. Bellacicco and lanes, 2022; International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2025). The Santiago Consensus, adopted at the 2025 World Summit on Teachers, makes a particular reference to disability in its policy action to “build an inclusive teaching workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities it serves”, acknowledging that this involves “tackling the stereotypes and often invisible barriers that prevent certain groups from considering a career in teaching” (UNESCO, 2025b, p.7). Furthermore, the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 argues that teachers with disabilities can be the drivers of inclusive transformation (International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2025). Most recently, the UNESCO Disability Inclusion Strategy reaffirms that the organisation will “encourage the development of policies aimed at supporting teachers with disabilities to enter, remain and thrive in the system” (UNESCO, 2025c, p.18).

6 With some and severe activity limitation

7 12 months or more

2.4. Teachers with Disabilities: Opportunities for and Challenges to their Inclusion

Research on education personnel with disabilities is limited, with most inquiry focused on in-service school teachers in Anglophone contexts. Nevertheless, these studies generally agree that **teachers with disabilities can make a unique contribution to inclusive education**, not only in their classrooms but also in the wider school community. Indeed, since many teachers with disabilities have experienced discrimination, exclusion or low expectations in their own school education, the decision to enter the profession is often motivated by a desire to create inclusive, accessible, and supportive learning environments for all students and promote broader systemic change (Duquette, 2000; Dvir, 2015; Ferri et al., 2001; Hankebo, 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Valle et al., 2004; Vogel and Sharoni, 2011). As observed by Duquette (2000) in her study of Canadian pre-service teachers:

They wanted to be the kind of teacher that made a difference in the lives of their pupils, to show the kind of compassion and genuine interest that was missing in their early academic experiences. They also wanted to change education so that other children would not have to suffer and struggle in the same manner they had. (Duquette, 2000, p.227)

In this regard, most teachers with disabilities consider their disability an advantage (Burns and Bell, 2011; Dvir, 2015; Ferri et al., 2001; Moore et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2007; Valle

et al, 2004). Their unique perspectives, experiences and pedagogical strategies and methods can **benefit students both with and without disabilities** (e.g. Lewis et al., 2003).

Beyond formal learning opportunities, the **'hidden curriculum'** – the implicit values that students acquire from how the school and system is organised – can play an important role in the formation of attitudes toward disability. Early exposure to teachers with disabilities can challenge students' stereotypes, foster an understanding that diversity is normal, and demonstrate that 'disability' and 'competence' can co-exist (Bryant and Curtner-Smith, 2009; Dvir, 2015; Neca et al., 2022; Tal-Alon and Lischinsky, 2023; Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lischinsky, 2019; Wilson et al., 2018). Moreover, it can promote greater acceptance of students with special educational needs among their peers in the classroom (OECD, 2023). From a whole-school perspective, teachers with disabilities offer a **unique lens for evaluating the effectiveness of inclusion policies and practices** and for recognising and supporting students who experience discrimination and inequality. In this way, schools can act as catalysts for wider societal reform (Wilson et al., 2018).

2.4.1. Pre-service Teachers with Disabilities: Issues of Support, Disclosure and Competency

Despite their potential role as agents of change, **teachers with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in education** (OECD, 2023). Research suggests that their exclusion can begin even before initial teacher education, when admissions tests can pose barriers for potential students (e.g. reading and writing for pre-service teachers with dyslexia) (e.g. Riddick and English, 2006). Once admitted to initial teacher education programmes, pre-service teachers with disabilities report two major challenges: a **lack of adequate support from the higher education institution (HEI) and concerns**

related to disability disclosure (Neca et al., 2022). Disclosure is particularly important for students with invisible disabilities as it enables them to access appropriate support and accommodations during both the theoretical and practical components of their training (Parker and Draves, 2016; Wilson et al., 2018). Without disclosure, pre-service teachers could miss opportunities to develop important skills, which could contribute to a diminished sense of self-efficacy (e.g. Hankebo, 2018 on deaf pre-service teachers). Nevertheless, some student teachers choose not to disclose their disability due to concerns about negative consequences and perceptions from peers and faculty (Wilson et al., 2018).

HEIs are generally willing to support students with disabilities. However, teacher standards tend to promote **a narrow, ableist definition of the ‘competent teacher’**, which privileges student teachers without disabilities. While maintaining the quality and status of the profession is important, an inclusive teacher education must balance competency with equal opportunity. Teaching is not a homogenous profession (Wilson et al., 2018) and there is a need to recognise multiple ways of demonstrating competence (Belaccico and lanes, 2022).

Upon graduation, **many newly qualified teachers with disabilities face barriers to employment** (Dvir, 2015; Vogel and Sharoni, 2011). Research reveals that school leaders can be reluctant to hire teachers with disclosed disabilities. In a study conducted in Israel, school leaders’ concerns largely related to professional issues (e.g. teacher performance, financial viability, potential absenteeism) and the impact on their own workload and that of other education personnel (Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lischinsky 2023). The findings suggest that school leaders face an ethical dilemma as they attempt to reconcile the inclusion agenda with broader professional responsibilities to the wellbeing of all staff and students (Tal-Alon and Lischinsky, 2021).

2.4.2. In-service Teachers with Disabilities: Physical and Attitudinal Barriers to Inclusion

Once in post, in-service teachers with disabilities can face additional physical and cultural barriers, including **limited accessibility and resources** (Wilson et al., 2018). Several studies also highlight **negative attitudes from colleagues**, which can lead to **an underestimation of professional competence** (e.g. Valle et al., 2004; Ferri et al., 2005; Hankebo, 2018). Indeed, in certain contexts, teachers with disabilities might only be considered an ‘expert’ in their disability (Bellacicco and lanes, 2022) and therefore employed only in schools where students share the same condition (e.g. Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lischinsky, 2019; Ferri et al., 2001).

Disclosure remains a persistent challenge throughout their careers: teachers must decide whether to disclose, to whom, when and to what degree. Those with invisible disabilities worry that disclosure could undermine their pedagogical authority, reduce their professional status or lead to social stigma, discrimination or even exclusion (Dvir, 2015; Valle et al., 2004; Riddick, 2003; Tal-Alon and Lischinsky, 2023; Vogel and Sharoni, 2011). Since the risks of disclosure generally outweigh the benefits, many teachers choose not to disclose their disabilities (Valle et al., 2004). This lack of disclosure **prevents access to the accommodations to which they are entitled** (Dvir, 2015). It also limits the availability of reliable data on disability representation in schools.

In terms of career progression, persons with disabilities often face a widespread perception that leadership and disability are incompatible (Foster-Fischman et al., 2007). A 2016 study of UK higher education highlighted **the institutional and personal barriers to accessing formal and informal leadership roles**. At the institutional level, researchers identified a lack of support, limited access

to continuing professional development and staff attitudes as major obstacles. At the personal level, low aspirations or reluctance to pursue leadership positions were key issues. Education personnel with disabilities expressed a need for more formal support processes to access resources, investment in opportunities for professional development (including mentoring) and improved awareness of equality and diversity. The study concluded that promoting disability disclosure in higher education was critical and this was more likely when the employer was committed to disability equality and disclosure would not negatively affect career progression (Emira et al., 2016). Indeed, disclosure can act as a barrier to academia careers (Damiani and Harbour, 2015) and, even when disabilities are disclosed, faculty may struggle to access accommodations despite the legal obligations of institutions. This impacts both staff workplace experiences and students' learning experiences (Yabo, 2024).

Even when accommodations are readily available, research suggests that pre- and in-service teachers often need to develop a range of individual coping strategies to study and work effectively (Riddick, 2003). This might involve devoting more time to lesson planning, preparation, marking and grading, which can increase their workload and working hours (Bellacicco and Ianes, 2022; Griffiths, 2012; Hankebo, 2018; Vogel and Sharoni, 2011).

2.4.3. Removing the Barriers to Inclusive Employment in Education

There are clearly a number of significant challenges to entry into the teaching profession for teachers with disabilities, and these challenges can persist throughout their careers. However, this does not preclude systemic and cultural change. Many researchers emphasise the importance of **disability awareness-raising** (Burns and Bell,

2010; Parker and Draves, 2016; Riddick, 2003). This can begin in initial teacher education and continuing professional development programmes which expose pre-service and in-service teachers to persons with disabilities, either as fellow students or teachers (e.g. Herrero et al., 2023 on inclusive teacher education in Spain). Alongside **networks of social support** (Duquette, 2000; Vogel and Sharoni, 2011) and **opportunities to engage in formal and informal leadership roles** (Emira et al., 2016), such approaches could promote a more accepting environment which recognises the valuable contribution of teachers with disabilities (Tal-Alon and Lischinsky, 2023). Ultimately, pre-service and in-service teachers with disabilities need to be empowered to act as the change agents many aspire to be, through **knowledge of their legal rights and effective workplace advocacy** to ensure access to appropriate accommodations (Dvir, 2015).

2.5. Conclusion

Although inclusive education is a high global policy priority, its translation into policies and practices at the national level remains limited. Successful implementation is largely hindered by the enduring legacy of the medical model of disability as well as by historical, cultural and institutional norms that continue to shape how disability is understood. These structural barriers to inclusion can create stigma, perpetuate discrimination and prevent the full participation of persons with disabilities in education, employment and society. Although the widespread adoption and ratification of international treaties signals a shift towards the social and human rights models of disability, embedding these approaches will take time in some contexts. Systemic challenges, such as the teacher supply crisis and a lack of pedagogical expertise in special and inclusive education, continue to impede school-level efforts. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities,

who remain underrepresented within the education sector. To address these issues, governments must invest in the education workforce to attract more teachers, specialists and support personnel – including persons with disabilities – and to equip them with the skills required to meet the diverse needs of all students. Increased public investment in education, combined with targeted financial support, is essential to ensure that persons with special educational needs and disabilities receive the necessary support and accommodations.

SOCIAL DIALOGUE FOR INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

3.1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a complex and ambitious policy agenda. Despite considerable efforts to fulfil commitments to inclusivity through national policies and school practices, implementation remains far from achieving the goals set out in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Slow progress on the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities (UNESCO, 2020) can be linked to **historical and cultural attitudes** towards “difference”, which continue to be prevalent in European societies today (e.g. Hamre, 2013; Øland et al., 2019). Equally, **institutional and structural factors**, shaped by dominant discourses on the purposes of education, reinforce the assumption that there is one ‘right’ path for every student, thereby inhibiting systemic shifts towards full inclusion (Tomlinson, 2017; Ydesen et al., 2022). Indeed, segregated forms of education persist in most EU Member States (Drál’ and Lenárt, 2025) and, in systems of choice, many children and parents engage in “self-exclusion” by opting for special education provisions (Shakespeare, 2006). These social structures influence students’ future learning and employment pathways and inhibit the development of a more disability-inclusive education workforce.

Beyond resistance to inclusion, there are **significant systemic challenges** which relate to education governance more broadly. As a result of decentralisation, much of the responsibility for inclusive education has been devolved to the regional, municipal and school levels. However, this devolution has often occurred without the necessary financial and human resources to ensure successful implementation (Ydesen et al., 2022). Thus, while the concept of inclusion is generally supported within the education community, inclusion in practice remains far from ideal. Indeed, supporting students with complex needs in mainstream classrooms increases the pedagogical and administrative demands placed on an already overburdened



teaching profession. This, in turn, undermines teachers' sense of self-efficacy and wellbeing (OECD, 2025).

Inclusive employment and labour rights, including policies on equality, diversity and non-discrimination, are already central to industrial relations discussions in many contexts (e.g. International Labour Organisation, 2024b). However, there is a prevailing assumption that inclusive education – which focuses primarily on the learning experiences of children and young people – is not an industrial concern. **This assumption needs to be challenged.** By placing education personnel at its core, the inclusion agenda directly impacts professional roles, workforce structures, terms of employment, working conditions and resource allocation, all of which are dependent on adequate education funding. All these industrial issues – and, similarly, the concerns of teachers identified in TALIS 2024 (OECD, 2025) – need to be addressed through formal processes between education trade unions and employer organisations. Indeed, inclusive education requires collaboration at all levels of the education system and cannot be realised without a coordinated commitment to supporting those responsible for its implementation. **Given the scale of the task, social dialogue, with its emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement across multiple levels of the education system, provides the most effective mechanism for achieving this goal.**

3.2. Social Dialogue on Inclusive Education

According to the European Union, social dialogue is a structured process of dialogue between social partners (employer organisations and trade unions) on issues of common interest (European Commission, 2016). It can be bipartite – between employer organisations and trade unions – or

tripartite – including public authorities as an official party. Social dialogue can take place at multiple levels, for example, national, regional, local or institutional level; however, the level at which it occurs depends on the nature of the issue under consideration. To achieve its objectives, social dialogue must take place at the level at which decisions are being made (Stevenson and Milner, 2023). This is especially true for inclusive education, which is dependent on multi-level, multi-sectoral systems of funding and support.

Most social dialogue between education trade unions and employer organisations occurs through the formal mechanism of **collective bargaining**, specifically during the negotiation of collective agreements. These agreements can include provisions on equal employment opportunities, workplace accommodations, fair recruitment, and health and safety for education personnel with disabilities (e.g. Holubová et al., 2024). Collective bargaining also provides a platform for negotiating teachers' pay and working conditions in the context of the inclusion agenda.

According to the EU definition, social dialogue encompasses formal and informal processes, which can take place at multiple levels, involving varying degrees of engagement. These are:

- Joint projects and initiatives
- Information sharing
- Consultation
- Negotiation or collective bargaining (European Commission, 2016)

The multiple mechanisms for social dialogue provide education social partners with opportunities to collaborate across sectors with other government departments to ensure **integrated provision**. For inclusive education is not only an educational issue; it intersects with broader social and economic

policy dimensions. Consequently, the identification of needs and the provision of support for persons with special educational needs and disabilities requires **cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration**. As argued in the 2020 GEM Report:

ensuring equal education opportunities for those at risk of exclusion is not the sole responsibility of education policy designers. It requires mobilizing multiple actors and aligning the administrative systems supporting various facets of vulnerable populations' lives. responsibilities for delivering inclusive education need to be shared horizontally among government departments or government and non-government actors, as well as vertically across education or government levels, taking their respective advantages into account. (UNESCO, 2020, p.90)

Joint projects enable the promotion of the inclusion agenda through **broader alliances in civil society**, such as parental associations or teacher education and training providers. Collaborations could also involve the organisation of **networks, forums or events** with non-governmental organisations, charities and disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) – organisations led and governed by persons with disabilities to represent their interests and advocate for their rights. Such initiatives can contribute to **raising awareness on disability rights** and reinforce the view that inclusive education relates to more comprehensive issues of social inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

Ultimately, for social dialogue to be high quality and to bring about educational,

professional and social change, it requires the appropriate enabling conditions. In this regard, Stevenson et al. (2022) have identified five characteristics of effective social dialogue:

- **Resources.** Social dialogue requires commitment and resourcing.
- **Architecture.** Social dialogue requires the appropriate structures at the right levels of the system.
- **Legitimacy.** Social dialogue requires all the parties involved to agree on the issues considered in scope and accepted as legitimate issues for social dialogue.
- **Objectives.** Social dialogue requires broad agreement about the expected outcomes.
- **Relationships.** Social dialogue depends on strong levels of trust between the social partners.

3.3. An Inclusion Agenda for Social Dialogue

In this report, we have highlighted how inclusive education both shapes, and is shaped by, multiple dimensions of the education system, from education funding, governance and school leadership to initial education and continuing professional development. This means that **inclusive education cannot be treated as a discrete topic for social dialogue**. As an approach to teaching and learning, it influences the professional experiences of all education personnel in multiple ways.

Furthermore, inclusive education, alongside health and social support services, is governed across multiple administrative levels, which differ across Europe. In decentralised systems, public expenditure related to education and/

or special education may be coordinated by regional or local authorities, limiting school leaders' autonomy over the allocation of financial and material resources. However, even in highly decentralised systems, central government ministries often continue to oversee functions of education that impact inclusion, such as special education provision, regulations on maximum class sizes, and curriculum and assessment. Ultimately, teachers' working conditions can be shaped by policies and practices formulated at different levels of the education system, including the school level. **This underscores the need for social dialogue mechanisms – and the resources, architecture and relationships which frame them – to function effectively across all levels.**

The significance of professional development to the inclusion agenda calls for **an extended bargaining agenda that encompasses both industrial and professional issues.** While initial teacher education is generally considered the domain of higher education institutions and falls under the professional autonomy of teacher educators, teachers have significant learning needs related to inclusive education, which in turn affect their self-efficacy, job satisfaction and wellbeing. Social dialogue serves as a mechanism to guarantee the right of all education personnel to professional development and contribute to improving the overall attractiveness of the teaching profession (Stevenson et al., 2018; Stevenson and Milner, 2023).

With this in mind, and given the scale and scope of the challenges in inclusive education, we argue that social dialogue should focus on three broad agenda items which support the basic infrastructure of inclusive education:

Education funding. Inclusive education requires general and targeted financial resources, yet significant gaps in education expenditure persist across Europe. Adequate funding is essential to the physical and digital accessibility of education in that it enables the provision of assistive technologies and

reasonable accommodations. Funding also directly affects the following two agenda items.

Teacher supply. The inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities requires a sufficient supply of highly qualified education personnel. Yet, many European systems face significant shortages of teachers, special education teachers, and education support personnel. Addressing supply issues can reduce class sizes. Making all the teaching professions attractive needs to be a priority (Stevenson and Milner, 2023).

Professional development. Teachers need the professional competencies to support students with special educational needs and disabilities. The entitlement to professional development is often secured through collective agreements but can also be developed through joint actions with social partners, universities and DPOs. Training events can raise disability awareness among education personnel, parents and the wider community, reducing stigma and discrimination.

These items underline the fact that inclusive education needs significant systemic structural support. The title of the project – *Inclusive Education for All Needs* – therefore takes on an expanded meaning: it emphasises that **the needs of all members of the education community** – students, parents and education personnel – are paramount to the successful implementation of the inclusion agenda.

3.4. Disability Representation in Social Dialogue

According to the UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006), State Parties shall guarantee the participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life. Social dialogue plays a crucial role in this regard, supporting the inclusion of persons with disabilities through entry into the profession, retention, or return to work, and ensuring individual accommodations. However, the disability slogan “Nothing about us without us” implies that **more meaningful participation is necessary** to place disability firmly on the agenda (International Labour Organisation, 2024).

The recent Santiago Consensus calls on governments to “promote the participation of the full diversity of teaching personnel in social dialogue processes ... including teachers with disabilities.... and promote and support their capacities to contribute effectively to social dialogue and advocate for fair and inclusive education systems” (UNESCO, 2025, p. 5). Similarly, in a panel convened by the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 at the Global Disability Summit in Berlin in April 2025, one key takeaway was that “teachers with disabilities must have the chance to actively participate in shaping education policy” (International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, n.d.). These statements suggest that **education social partners need to centre disability representation in social dialogue mechanisms and embed disability rights in collective bargaining processes** (Public Services International and International Labour Organisation, 2025).

3.5. Conclusion

Education social partners need to challenge the assumption that inclusive education is not a topic for social dialogue. Inclusive education has a direct impact on industrial issues, which education trade unions and employer organisations should address collaboratively. Most social dialogue related to the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities occurs through collective bargaining and is formalised in collective agreements. However, the multiple mechanisms of social dialogue provide opportunities to engage in cross-sectoral, multi-level collaborations on inclusive education to ensure more integrated provision. Joint actions, such as networks, forums and events with civil society organisations, can promote disability awareness. Nonetheless, inclusive education requires an extended bargaining agenda that includes dialogue on education funding, teacher supply and professional development. Moreover, disability representation in social dialogue is essential to ensure the full and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in inclusive education systems. Ultimately, effective social dialogue is dependent on the appropriate conditions: resources, architecture, legitimacy, objectives and relationships.

PROMOTING THE INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES IN EDUCATION

4.1. Introduction

This chapter of the report is based on the results of an online survey distributed to ETUCE and EFEE member organisations. The aims of the survey were to understand patterns of action, and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of social dialogue, on inclusive education. In sections 4.2 and 4.3, we analyse the responses of 77 organisations: 45 ETUCE member organisations (all social partners) and 32 EFEE member organisations (6 social partners and 26 organisations affiliated to social partners). This quantitative analysis is supported by open-text responses from various member organisations. We interpret the results in relation to the social and human rights models of disability, using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; United Nations, 2006) as a framework of reference. In the final section, we consider the implications of our analysis for ETUCE and EFEE social partners with regard to improving the quality and effectiveness of social dialogue on inclusive education.

4.2. Disability Inclusion at the Organisational Level

To promote inclusion effectively, organisations should lead by example. Meeting the standards that they set for others establishes credibility and demonstrates that inclusive workplaces are a natural extension of inclusive education systems.

In Part 1 of the online survey, we asked the ETUCE and EFEE member organisations about their disability-inclusive actions at the organisational level. The survey items were divided into two sections: **organisational structures and personnel and education personnel representation**. Overall, the survey

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responses revealed considerable variation across the organisations, with some actions having strong engagement and others very little.

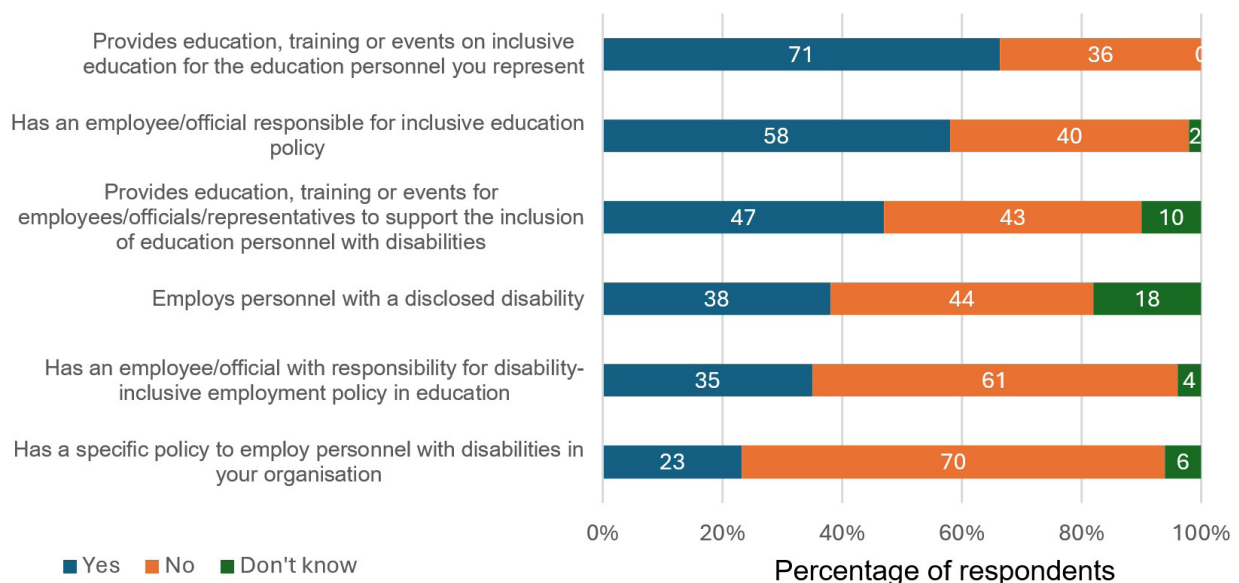
4.2.1. Organisational Structures and Personnel

With regard to organisational structures and personnel, 74% of survey respondents (including both ETUCE and EFEE member organisations) indicated that their organisation provided education, training or events on inclusive education for members, and close to two thirds (58%) had an employee or official responsible for inclusive education policy (see Figure 1.). By contrast, less than half (47%) of respondent organisations provided education, training, or events to support the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities, and only 38% reported employing personnel with a disclosed disability. Even fewer had an employee responsible for disability-inclusive employment policy in education (35%) or a disability-inclusive employment policy within their organisation (23%).

In general, these results suggest that **ETUCE and EFEE member organisations focus to a greater extent on disability-inclusive education** through policy advocacy and continuing professional development (CPD) activities for education personnel. An example of such CPD was provided by one ETUCE member organisation:

The ESFTUG is the only organisation which started to promote the professional development of school teachers and kindergarten workers with the skills for how to work with students of disabilities. The special programme was developed by ESFTUG from 2015. It was a novelty in the Georgian education sector, which helped to expand this aspect in schools and kindergartens. This programme still continues successfully and includes sharing European practices. (ESFTUG, Georgia).

Figure 1. Survey Responses on Organisational Structures and Personnel



As mainstream schools attempt to implement national inclusion reforms, this focus on the professional needs of education personnel is positive. However, there is **much less evidence that ETUCE and EFEE member organisations have developed policies and strategies for disability-inclusive employment** – within their own organisations and the education sector more widely. Without a cohesive approach to supporting education personnel with disabilities, these groups are likely to be marginalised within the education sector as a whole.

4.2.2. Education Personnel Representation

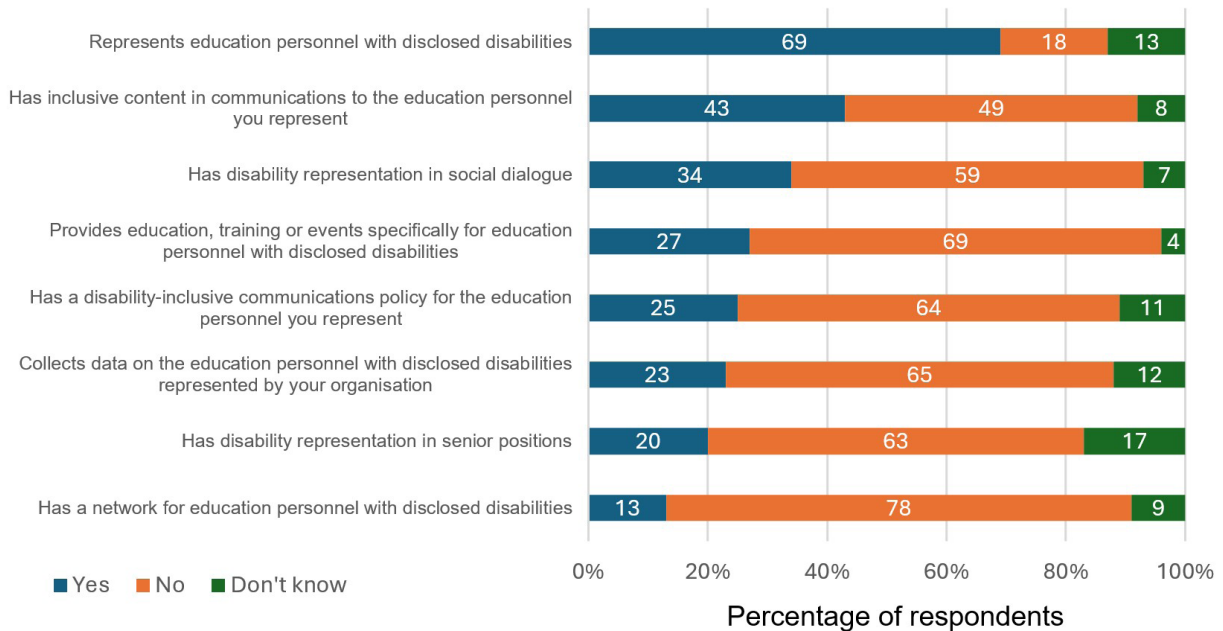
With the slogan “Nothing about us without us”, the disability rights movement has long advocated for the meaningful participation of disabled persons in the development of policies and programmes which affect their lives. The UN CRPD specifies that persons with disabilities should be guaranteed, and be able to enjoy, the same political rights as persons with no disabilities, including **the right to effectively and fully participate in non-governmental organisations and associations** (United Nations, 2006, art. 29). Moreover, to ensure overall national implementation and monitoring of the Convention, it calls for the involvement and full participation of civil society, in particular persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006, art. 33). From a social model perspective, representation makes disability ‘visible’, demonstrating that persons with disabilities are not only employed in the education sector but can take on leadership roles or influence policy. It therefore has the potential to challenge stereotypes, reduce stigma and reduce attitudinal barriers to disability inclusion (e.g. Dvir, 2015; Ferri et al., 2001).

Despite the obvious need for, and benefits of, disability representation in public and political life, the survey responses indicate that **ETUCE and EFEE member organisations still have some areas for development** (see Figure 2). Significantly, over two thirds of the respondent organisations (69%) reported that they represented persons with disclosed disabilities. However, just under one third either did not represent persons with disabilities (18%) or did not know whether they did (13%). While only concerning a minority of respondent organisations, the latter findings are noteworthy if civil society organisations are to be fully inclusive, democratic, and reflect the population at large.

The perceived underrepresentation of persons with disabilities could relate to a second area for potential development: **disability data**. In fact, the survey revealed that the majority of organisations that responded to the survey did not collect data on the education personnel with disclosed disabilities represented by their organisations (65%). Only 12% of organisations did collect such data. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there might be a number of reasons for this data deficit.

First, the UN CRPD obliges State Parties to collect appropriate statistical data to ensure the design of evidence-based disability policy which supports implementation of the UN CRPD; however, it also recognises that such data collection **must comply with national legislation and ensure confidentiality and respect for the privacy of persons with disabilities** (United Nations, 2006). Second, in many Member States, the concept of disability is still associated with individual deficiency and persons who disclose their disabilities can face stigma and discrimination, particularly in the workplace (e.g. see Chapter 5 Romania case). Accordingly, this lack of knowledge might be linked to wider cultural barriers which discourage persons from revealing such personal information.

Figure 2. Survey Responses on Education Personnel Representation



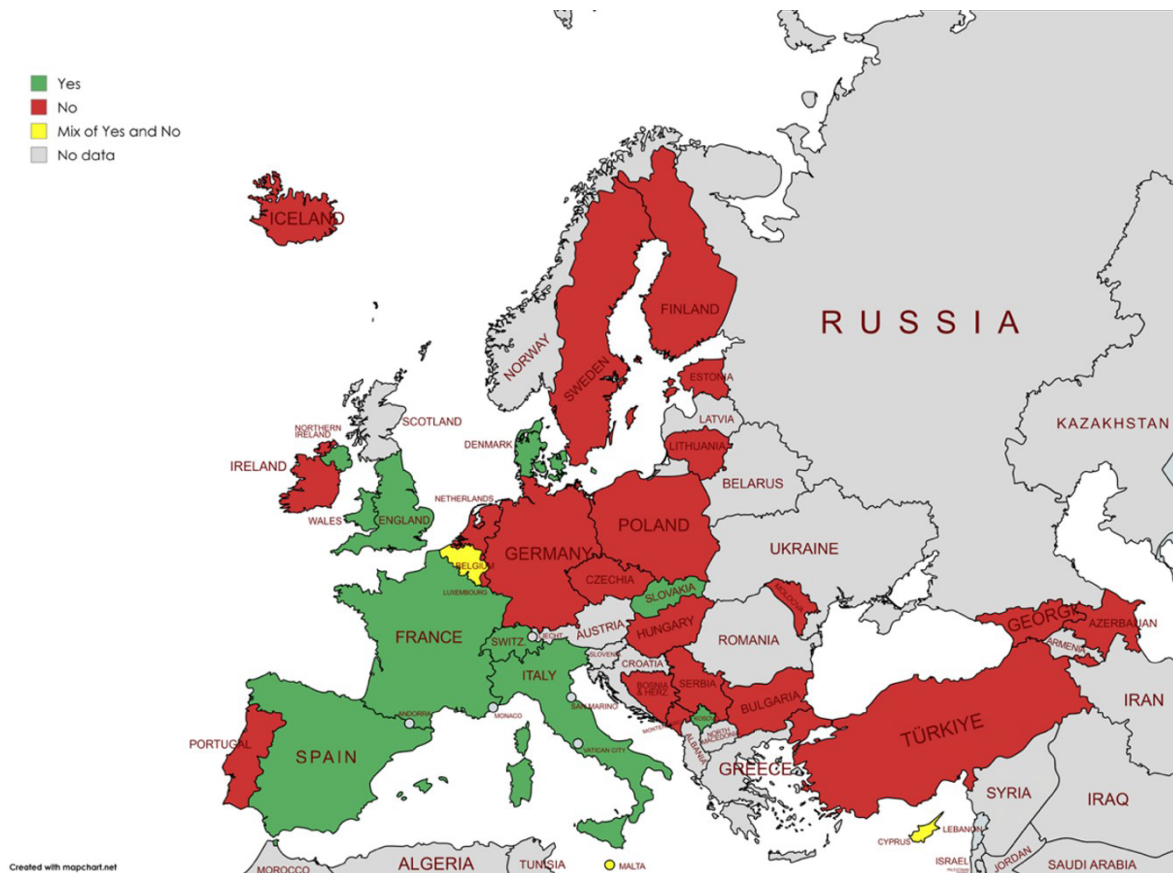
Whatever the rationale, **without adequate data, ETUCE and EFEE member organisations can only have limited knowledge and understanding of the disability employment situation in education.** This limits their possibilities to provide education personnel with disabilities with the appropriate support and include them in strategic decision-making processes at the organisational or sectoral levels. Ultimately, it prevents the creation of inclusive workplaces where all employees can thrive. Disability data – which enables an assessment of individuals’ functional needs – should therefore be a priority for education organisations. Nonetheless, we recognise that such data collection is dependent on organisational research capacity (see below).

Two further areas for development are associated with ETUCE and EFEE member organisations’ internal personnel structures: **disability representation in social dialogue and senior positions.** According to the survey responses, just over one third (34%) of respondent organisations indicated that

they had disability representation in social dialogue. If we focus only on the data provided by national-level social partners, where disability advocacy is likely to have an impact on a greater number of disabled persons, we find that these organisations were predominantly found in Western Europe (see Figure 3). This suggests that there is still some work to be done on disability representation in educational political life in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, which could be linked to historical, societal norms that are still in processes of development.

Low disability representation in social dialogue is problematic if we consider the significant barriers that persons with disabilities experience in employment e.g. pay inequalities, precarious contracts, lack of workplace accommodations, lower access to continuing professional development, stigma and discrimination (e.g. Eurostat, 2025e). Moreover, these barriers can be amplified when disability interacts with gender, race and socioeconomic background. Beyond the

Figure 3. Map of Disability Representation within Social Dialogue among ETUCE and EFEE Social Partners



need to engage in consultations and collective bargaining on industrial and professional issues, social dialogue could enable persons with disabilities to contribute to broader policy discussions on education and inclusive education specifically.

Underrepresentation in social dialogue might be associated with **disabled employees’ limited opportunities for leadership development**. Indeed, the survey responses revealed that only 20% of respondent ETUCE and EFEE member organisations had disability representation in senior positions. While many headquarter organisations are small with few personnel, it is important to underline that leadership can be enacted at multiple levels e.g. union branch officials or workplace representatives or middle

leadership in educational institutions. Such professional opportunities are important on several levels. Ultimately though, if ETUCE and EFEE member organisations are to challenge ableism and respond to the diverse needs of all education personnel, **persons with disabilities need to be at the table in decision-making processes** (United Nations, 2006, art. 29).

In the previous section of this chapter, we revealed how education, training and events were a core component of ETUCE and EFEE member organisations’ work to support the inclusion of students with disabilities and, to a lesser degree, employees with disabilities. However, the survey also revealed that only 27% of respondent organisations provided education, training and events specifically

for persons with disabilities. Similarly, only 13% provided networking opportunities for persons with disabilities. Training, events and networks are important arenas for peer support, where persons with disabilities can share experiences of disclosure, accommodations or discrimination, which can then be used to inform disability policy and strategy. Moreover, such forums promote disability awareness which can contribute to wider organisational and sectoral cultural change.

One final important point in this survey section relates to organisational communications. The UN CRPD recognises **the importance of accessible information and communications to the capacity of persons with disabilities' to enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms**. This is linked to their freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006, art. 9 and art. 21). Inclusive communications ensure that all people receive information in clear, accessible, and respectful ways with content that does not exclude or discriminate against anyone. Nonetheless, the survey data revealed an interesting paradox. While almost half of survey respondents (43%) reported that they had disability-inclusive content in their communications to members, only one quarter (25%) indicated that they had a disability-inclusive communications policy (see Figure 2). Thus, while communications content could include positive stories of persons with disabilities, those who are included in the content might not actually be able to access it. Inclusive communications therefore have two crucial dimensions: content (what we communicate) and method (how we communicate it). Significantly, when we examined the social partner data, twelve organisations indicated that they had an inclusive communications policy, and nine of these organisations had inclusive content. For these organisations, **the content was prioritised over the method of communication**.

At the beginning of this section, we argued that disability inclusion could still be improved within ETUCE and EFEE member organisations. Some areas in need of development might be reflective of historical organisational and societal norms that are still prevalent within specific cultural contexts and will take time to change even with the implementation of disability-inclusive legislative frameworks. However, this does not mean that employees and employers should not or could not act. Civil society organisations, such as those represented by ETUCE and EFEE, can be at the forefront of shaping disability-inclusive employment policies, strengthening the voice of persons with persons with disabilities, and promoting wider cultural change (United Nations, 2006, art. 33).

Nonetheless, the open-text responses revealed **three key issues** which could present a challenge to this potentially transformative role: **the (real or perceived) absence of persons with disabilities** within the organisation and therefore little need for disability-inclusive policies; **the limited organisational capacity** to represent persons with disabilities in general or under current social, political and economic circumstances; and, specifically for education trade unions, **the need to promote a cohesive organisational identity** based on solidarity, rather than differentiation, amongst their membership. The following comments are representative of these perspectives:

We do not have a disabled teacher in our staff and, consequently, no need for inclusive programmes and disability inclusion actions regarding our employees. (TVET centre, Slovenia)

Our trade union works to support, assist and protect the rights and interests of all its members (including

people with disabilities). The trade union does not conduct specific activities in this area. This requires additional staff/position in the organisation, which is currently quite difficult to implement. (Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine)

The PDSZ (the Democratic Trade Union of Teachers) represents all kinds of education workers from early education to higher education. We always try to raise our voice in the media for the rights of all education workers, and take part in negotiations with the government to represent their interests, however, the lack of European union traditions on workers' side and the intensive counter-attacks from government side makes our work really hard. (PDSZ, Hungary)

We represent all the education personnel. It doesn't matter if a person is disabled or not. We don't have any disabled person in our organisation, but we always employ the best person to every position. (OAJ, Finland)

On some level, **organisational capacity** is central to all three aforementioned issues. Education and training organisations, which might experience funding and teacher shortages, will deploy their available human resources where most required, while smaller employer organisations and education trade unions might not have the staff to strategise for specific groups of education personnel. Nonetheless, **the focus on 'equality' (treating all education personnel the same) over 'equity' (ensuring that resources**

and opportunities are allocated based on individual needs) could risk marginalisation of the most vulnerable members and reduce the possibility to contribute to much broader educational and organisational goals of social justice.

By contrast, where there was some capacity or greater financial and administrative autonomy, such as in larger trade unions, federations or universities, persons with disabilities were represented in a number of ways:

NEU has a dedicated, elected Executive member for Disabled people who identifies as disabled, a Disabled members Organising Forum, policy staff for disability issues, a legal team working on disability issues for members and an organiser working on Disabled members issues. (NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

In the Federation we belong to, CGIL, there is a specific Disability office. (FLC CGIL, Italy)

Representation of persons with disabilities is ensured in committees and workplace representatives. There is social dialogue between people with disabilities and the organisation. (University of Dunaújváros, Hungary)

One particular university in Hungary had adopted a more comprehensive approach to disability inclusion which involved: a framework to support education personnel with disclosed disabilities, a Disability Committee which supported the implementation and monitoring of disability-inclusive initiatives, data collection on

persons with disabilities to tailor support services to their needs, disability-inclusive communications content and policies such as access through assistive technologies and sign-language interpretation, and training and events to raise awareness and enhance the capabilities of personnel with disabilities. As noted by their survey respondent:

We integrate inclusivity as a core value across our educational and organisational strategies. We strive to create a welcoming and supportive environment for everyone, regardless of abilities. (Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary)

Significantly, only one respondent recognised that dis/ability needed to be understood over a lifetime, which had implications for the strategic work of the organisation:

The experience of the ASTI is that teachers acquire disabilities during their working lives. Our representational role is to ensure that they avail of all leave and other entitlements, including once-off extensions of same, and if necessary, negotiating early retirement. (ASTI, Ireland)

4.3. Social Partner Actions on Disability Inclusion

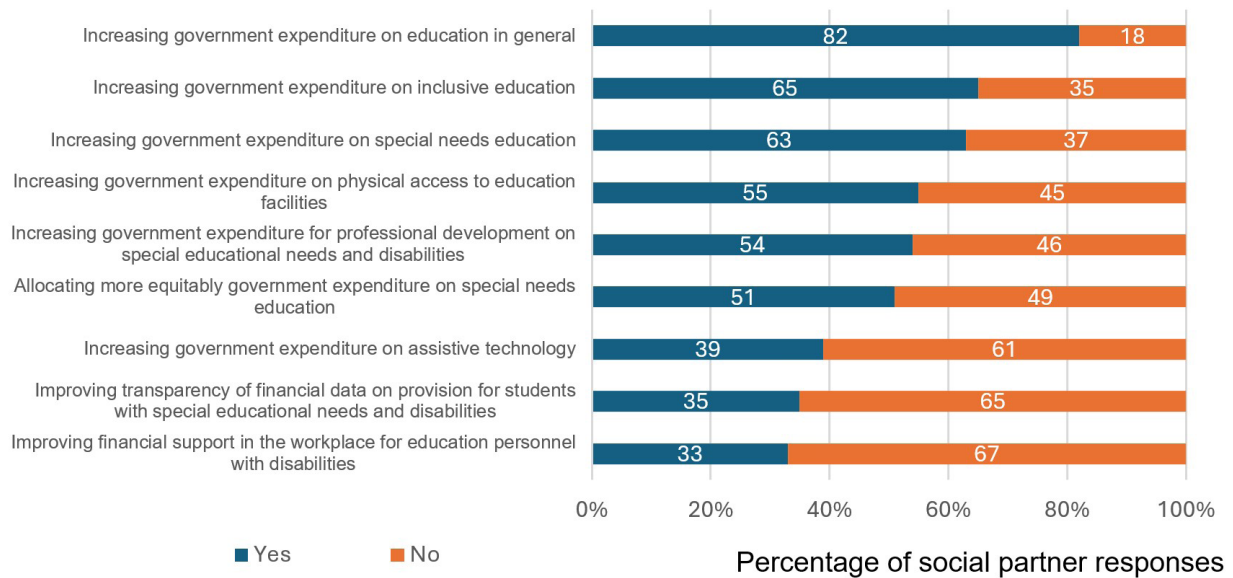
In Part 2 of the online survey, we asked the ETUCE and EFEE social partners about their individual and collaborative actions on disability inclusion. These actions were divided into six topic areas: **education funding, education policy, recruitment and retention, professional learning and development, pay and working conditions, and disability equality and anti-discrimination.**

As with Part 1, the survey responses to Part 2 revealed considerable variation across the organisations, with some areas and actions having strong engagement and others much less. Below we describe the key findings from our analysis and what this means for social dialogue on disability inclusion in education.

4.3.1. Education Funding

With regard to education funding, the survey revealed that **ETUCE and EFEE social partners were principally engaged in action oriented towards increasing government expenditure** (see Figure 4). The three most common actions in this regard were: increasing government expenditure on education in general (82%), increasing government expenditure on inclusive education (65%) and increasing government expenditure on special needs education (63%). Significantly, the first item – **increasing government expenditure on education in general** – was the second highest scoring item across the whole survey. By contrast, ETUCE and EFEE social partners were engaged least in action on: improving financial support in the workplace for education personnel with disabilities (33%) and improving the transparency of financial data on the provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities (35%).

Figure 4. Survey Responses for Action on Education Funding



Analysis of the social partner responses revealed that 38% of their actions on education funding involved some form of social dialogue with a social partner, while 20% were conducted alone or with another organisation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common action with a social partner was directed towards increasing government expenditure on education in general. The most common action conducted alone or with a non-social partner focused on increasing government expenditure on physical access to education facilities.

When asked about the challenges to social dialogue in this regard, education trade unions pointed to **the systems and structures of education funding**. Issues included limited funding (BUPL, Denmark) and short-term funding (FECCOO, Spain; TUI, Ireland) for inclusive and special education, which meant that initiatives were often unsustainable. However, **low education funding in general was a major concern** for most unions and several employers (e.g. NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community; OLTEK, Cyprus; COV, Belgium;

SLFP Enseignement, Belgium; The Trade Union of Education in Finland; TUI, Ireland; SNES-FSU, France). As one respondent commented:

To maintain an effective social dialogue with the present Hungarian government on the topic of special education is really hard as the funding of the state education system suffers from fundamental deficiencies. The school buildings are in such a bad state that they are not fit enough for even average students. The teachers pay is so low that the shortage of staff is despairing in the whole sector. (PDSZ, Hungary)

Higher education employers in Hungary similarly noted problems with education funding. For example, the University of Dunaújváros described how the lack of material resources affected implementation of inclusive education policies. Furthermore, two

respondents criticised the lack of transparency in financial reporting, which meant that it was difficult to evaluate government expenditure on inclusive education.

Further issues related to **the diverse and multiple funding models and mechanisms for special and inclusive education**. This could complicate discussions (Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary) or inhibit progress even when industrial relations were more positive (ASTI, Ireland). It could mean that responsibility for the allocation of special education funding was decided locally (e.g. in Denmark and Finland). One VET institution highlighted the implications for social dialogue on the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities:

Our school is funded “per capita”, which means that government funding is limited to a specific amount of money. Should a situation of a disabled teacher arise, I expect there would be a lot of energy and time used in negotiating for additional funding. (TVET centre, Slovenia)

Other respondents noted regional and national **government tendencies to prioritise different areas of public expenditure** (e.g. VBE Germany; KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community; Malta Union of Teachers; TUI, Ireland). In Ukraine, the conflict had made this issue more acute:

Currently, due to martial law, Ukraine’s education sector (like other sectors) is partially funded by the state and partially funded by external assistance from other countries/international organizations...The issue of paying salaries to teachers without arrears and ensuring safe working conditions

remains a priority and is crucially important now... Unfortunately, financing inclusive education is a very difficult topic in the current environment. (Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine)

One education trade union highlighted the challenge of making distinctions between education and inclusive education in negotiations with employers:

In general, it is difficult to distinguish where our social dialogue on education funding for inclusion begins and where it ends. We cover this topic in every negotiation with the government and “sell it” to the media and our members as “more money” into the quality education. Leading social dialogue is difficult per se as it has to embrace the whole community of educators and other personnel in schools who might have a different point of view on what the priority is. Distinguishing the specials for the disabled and the rest might crack the force we use in the social dialogue and negotiations in general. We are aware that detailing our narrative on what education needs might weaken our voice. Having said that we do press on the government that quality education should be inclusive and that schools need resources for that. (ČMOS PŠ, Czechia)

In certain contexts, ETUCE and EFEE social partners maintained that **inclusive education was not considered a topic for social dialogue**, which limited the possibilities for

collaboration (e.g. Education and Science Trade Union Federation of Moldova; Algemene Onderwijsbond, Netherlands; Odborový zväz školstva, Slovakia; UESCK/SBASHK, Kosovo; Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary; Finnish Education Employers – Sivista; DAU-SEN, Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkish Cypriot Community). In fact, this was a key issue for all the inclusion topic areas.

Finally, **the overall quality of the social partnership and social dialogue** was considered detrimental to efforts to improve funding for inclusive education. As one education trade union remarked:

In the last few years, social dialogue has been ineffective. The government managed to divide unions therefore all aspects related to funding have been affected. In addition, the European economic governance system, which treats funding for education as a cost not as an investment, has led to repeated cuts to schools' budgets, jeopardising inclusion. (Federazione UILSCUOLA RUA, Italy)

Similarly, several employers and education trade unions noted the poor coordination between different policies, systems and stakeholders (e.g. between the Ministry of Education and local health offices in Italy, and between organisations for education, health and social care in Bulgaria).

In general, **social dialogue on education funding for inclusive education was complex and difficult**. However, social partners were able to share **some positive outcomes** achieved through social dialogue or, in the case of education trade unions, through wider support from disability organisations, parental groups, and the media. This had led to increased human resources (e.g. education

support personnel) and material resources (e.g. computer hardware and assistive technologies).

After long negotiations, the sealed envelope was raised a bit. Studies are underway on the feasibility of support with current resources. (COV, Belgium)

Significant public interest and disability NGO advocacy have improved funding for inclusion at multiple levels. Teacher unions are trust advocates in this space. (ASTI, Ireland)

The NEU successfully led a campaign to get increased SEND funding for schools pre-COVID. We worked with parent groups and school leaders and local authority partners. (NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

Despite all the challenges, progress continues through social dialogue and collective actions. Increased budgets, the recruitment of more teachers, and infrastructure improvements have been achieved with the support of families and effective media coverage. (KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community)

Laptops for educators and for students, with special programmes and features for people with disabilities. (Ministry of Education, Malta)

Although we lack precise data for inclusion-specific expenses, investments have been made in recent years to support

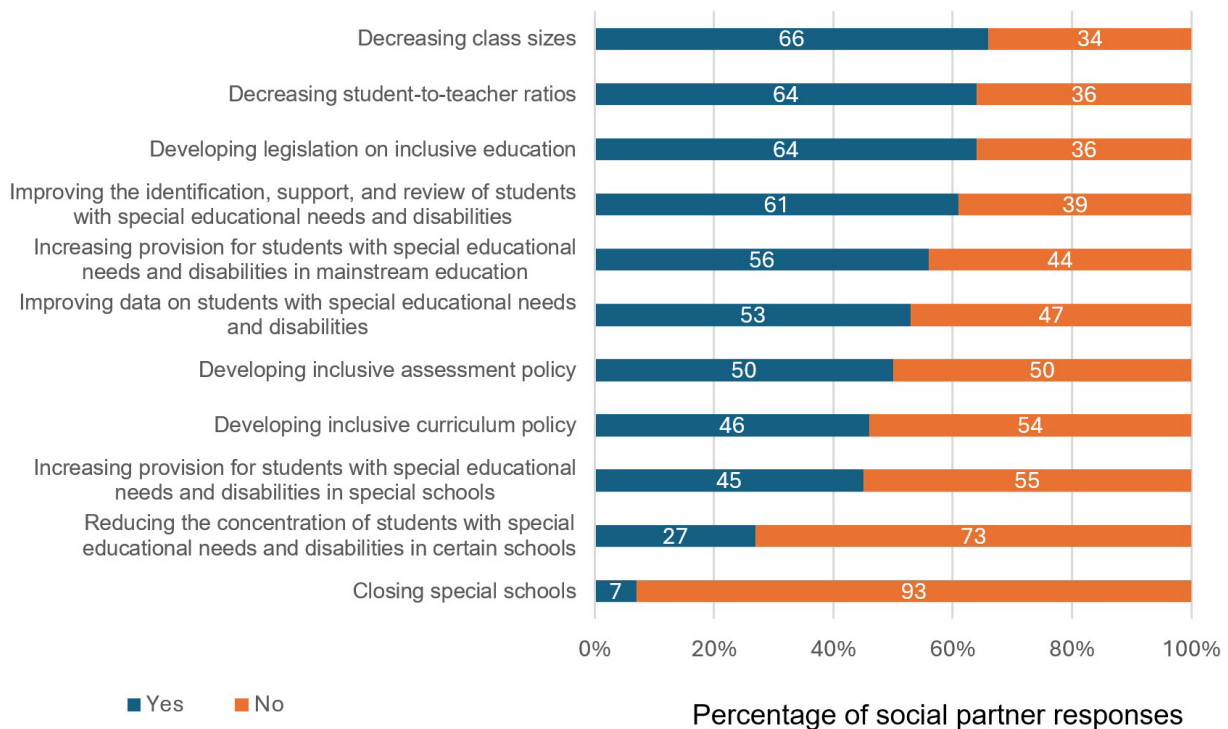
this goal. For instance, there have been infrastructure developments and increased funding opportunities, such as additional support for staff mobility for colleagues with special needs. These actions reflect ongoing dialogue and collaboration within our institution, including with our social partners, Tempus Public Foundation and Mathia Corvinus Collegium. (Simmelweis University, Hungary)

Nonetheless, in many contexts, social dialogue on the funding of inclusive education was still in progress (e.g. Odborový zväz školstva, Slovakia). There was a need, as one trade union respondent commented, “to keep the topic on the table” (ČMOS PŠ, Czechia).

4.3.2. Education Policy

With regard to education policy, the survey revealed that **ETUCE and EFEE social partner actions were mostly oriented towards inclusive education issues experienced in mainstream education** (see Figure 5). Significantly, the two most common actions were linked to classroom conditions: (i) decreasing class sizes (66%) and (ii) decreasing student-to-teacher ratios (64%). The next most common actions—all with more than half of the social partners responding affirmatively—related to legislation (64%), identification policy (61%), and processes on inclusion in mainstream education (56%). ETUCE and EFEE social partners were **least likely to engage in activities related to special school provision**: the least common action was oriented towards the closure of special schools, with only 7% indicating affirmatively.

Figure 5. Survey Responses for Action on Education Policy



From these results, it is clear that **inclusive education is prioritised**. However, actions tended to focus on general policies in mainstream education rather than those related specifically to students with special educational needs and disabilities. This finding is consistent with the data from the focus group interviews. Nonetheless, **nearly half of ETUCE and EFEE social partners continue to see a role for special schools**: action had even been taken to increase special school provision.

Analysis of the social partner responses revealed that 31% of their actions on education policy were conducted with a social partner and 22% alone or with a non-social partner. Decreasing class sizes was the most common action conducted alone or collaboratively (with another organisation or social partner). Large class sizes in mainstream education challenge teachers' capacity to provide an inclusive education. However, this could be considered a greater concern in the context of a teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

Many of the challenges associated with social dialogue on education policy were the same as those on education funding. For example, **education policies could be determined at different levels of the system**. Moreover, several education trade unions felt that **low education expenditure** – and the subsequent lack of human and material resources – negatively affected all efforts to engage in social dialogue on education policy (e.g. COV, Belgium; The Trade Union of Education in Finland; SLFP Enseignement, Belgium; Malta Union of Teachers; VBE, Germany; KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community; TUI, Ireland; Odborový zväz školstva, Slovakia; DAU-SEN, Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkish Cypriot Community). Overall, this limited any attempts to develop inclusive education systems through more targeted reforms.

Nonetheless, one particular issue for education policy was **the lack of a common understanding and vision for inclusive**

education (e.g. NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; LCH, Switzerland; Odborový zväz školstva, Slovakia; FLC CGIL, Italy; LEETU, Lithuania). Some education trade unions and employer organisations felt that their political leaders remained attached to a segregated model of special education:

The difficulty in Flanders is to break away from the current segregated educational structure, where we have regular education on one side and special (extraordinary) education on the other. Inclusive education requires a complete rethinking of that structure. The challenge, therefore, is to overcome that rigid thinking. (Go! Onderwijs Van De Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Netherlands)

A second issue concerned **communication and cooperation between parents and education personnel**. Some ETUCE and EFEE member organisations described how parents could refuse to accept the identification of need and the support of specialists (e.g. WEF Bulgaria; Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb, Croatia). At the same time, it was recognised that parents, alongside education personnel, were key stakeholders in advocating for inclusive education reform. As noted by one union, “most of the pressure comes from the families of children with disabilities and/or from small groups of workers” (FECCOO, Spain).

In terms of outcomes, education trade unions and employer organisations highlighted **achievements in both mainstream and special education provision**, underlining the prevalence of the segregated model. However, some did note that political perceptions had shifted from a medical to a social model of disability (e.g. FLC CGIL, Italy).

Through social dialogue, it was reached not to close all of the special schools for children with special needs. (VBE, Germany)

In the Netherlands, we have since a long time, a policy for 'appropriate education' which means that, in principle, all pupils/students should go to the same school. The problem is that the schools do not have the means to offer all the 'appropriate education' that is needed...We have now realised a definition of 'basic norms', at least for basic education. As it was totally unclear to schools what they were obliged to offer and what not. (Algemene Onderwijsbond, Netherlands)

Social dialogue is the key to the successful development of inclusive policies. An example of this is the discovery of new therapeutic services, the development of activities related to adapted sports and the participation of children with special needs in theater schools, exhibitions, workshops, so that they can develop their strengths and participate in the life of society through their achievements. (Center for support of inclusive education processes, Bulgaria)

There has been significant improvement in programmes for transition to adult life at the end of compulsory education at age 18. Also new vocational sandwich courses have helped people with disabilities access the labour market more easily. (FECCOO, Spain)

One particular issue in mainstream education was **class sizes**:

A huge review of special education legislation reduced class size and pupil teacher ratio. It is now a huge political issue which government cannot ignore. (TUI, Ireland)

International accreditations on education have provided a reference for the ideal conditions during negotiations of class sizes, student-to-teacher ratios. Additionally, motivated improvements on accessibility issues, help-desk applications, empowering psychological counselling center, etc. (DAU-SEN, Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkish Cypriot Community)

We have a regulation in Law on elementary and secondary schools, as well in pre-school institutions, about the number of students in the classroom or group. If there are students with special needs, only two students with special needs could be in one classroom or group and the class size is lower in that case. (Teachers Union of Serbia)

However, there was **some disenchantment with the outcomes** of social dialogue on education policy (e.g. PDSZ, Hungary; ASTI, Ireland). Despite demands, class sizes remained an issue (e.g. SLFP Enseignement, Belgium).

4.3.3. Recruitment and Retention

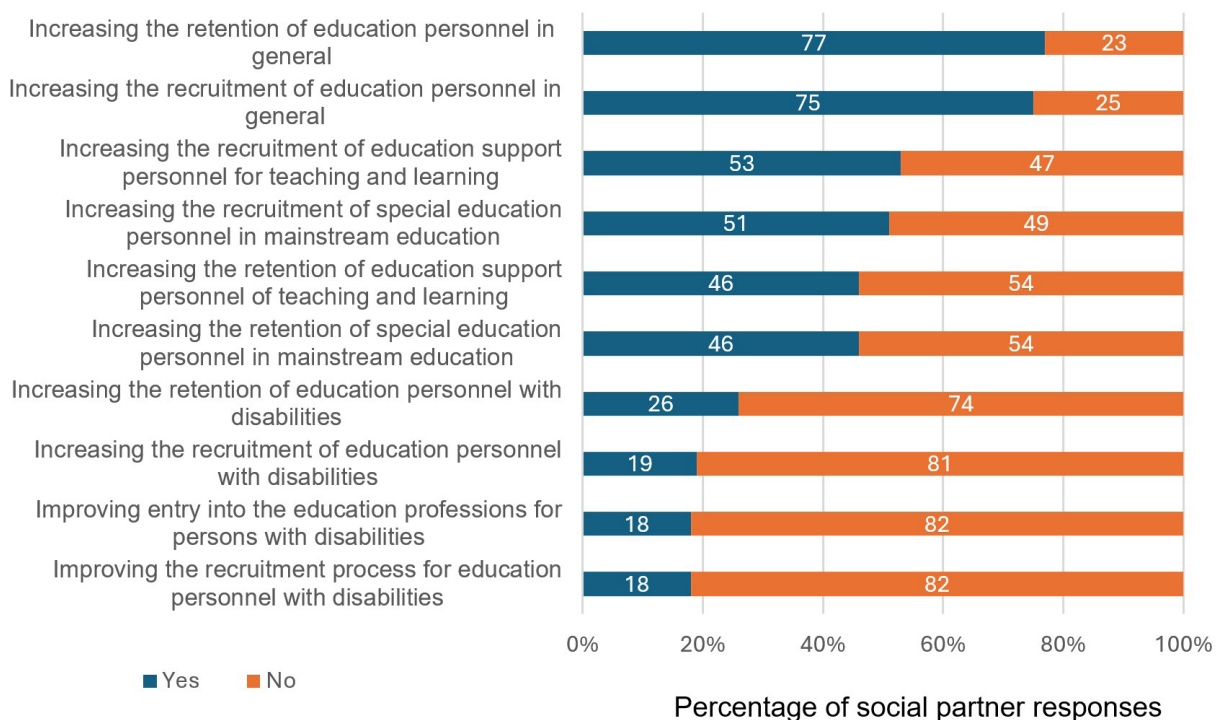
With regard to recruitment and retention, the survey revealed that **ETUCE and EFEE social partners had the highest level of engagement in actions oriented towards education personnel in general** (see Figure 6). In this regard, *retention* (77%) had a slightly greater focus than *recruitment* (75%); while only a minimal distinction, the emphasis on keeping teachers in the profession is consistent with wider concerns on teacher supply (e.g. OECD, 2024). Just over half of all social partner respondents were engaged in actions related to the recruitment of education support personnel (53%) and special education personnel in mainstream education (51%), which underlines **the significance of additional and specialist teachers** to implementing inclusive education in the mainstream classroom.

Reflecting an emerging pattern across the data, **ETUCE and EFEE social partners were least likely to be engaged in actions oriented towards pre- or in-service teachers**

with disabilities. For example, only 18% of respondent social partners undertook action to improve both the recruitment process for education personnel with disabilities and their entry into the education professions (18%); not many more had attempted to increase the recruitment (19%) and retention (26%) of education personnel with disabilities. Arguably, some of this inaction could be linked to **a concern for quantity (in terms of supply) over quality (in terms of human diversity)** and the belief that education systems need more teachers, specialists, and education personnel in general rather than teachers with specific characteristics in particular. However, this means that the barriers that keep teachers with disabilities out of the profession are likely to remain longer, thereby reducing the potential benefits to inclusive education and teacher supply.

Analysis of the social partner responses revealed that 27% of their actions on recruitment and retention were conducted with a social partner and 17% alone or with a non-social partner. However, 50% had no

Figure 6. Survey Responses for Action on Recruitment and Retention



engagement of any type, which is significant if we consider the current teacher recruitment and retention crisis in education and special education in particular. Increasing the retention of education personnel in general was the most common action conducted with a social partner, while increasing the recruitment of education personnel in general was the most common action conducted alone or with another organisation. Improving entry into the education professions for persons with disabilities was the action in which there was least organisational engagement of any type.

When asked about the challenges to social dialogue on recruitment and retention for inclusion, respondents wrote of **the broader challenges of teacher supply**. Overall, this was considered one of the most important issues in mainstream and special education. For education trade unions, key issues were the casualisation of education personnel (FLC CGIL, Italy) and the lower status of special education on government policy agendas (e.g. KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community).

While legislation and quotas existed to prevent discrimination and promote recruitment (e.g. Cyprus, Italy), many survey respondents highlighted **the low labour market participation of persons with disabilities in the education sector**. For employer organisations, the main issues were the lower education levels – or perceived lower competences – of teachers with disabilities (Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary; Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb, Croatia) and the complexity of access and reasonable accommodations for those who might also have to work with students with severe disabilities (e.g. Center for support of inclusive education processes - Plovdiv Region, Bulgaria; Ministry For Education, Sport, Youth, Research & Innovation, Malta). Some of the challenges were linked to prejudice within organisations and wider society; one respondent from Spain believed that it was particularly difficult trying to influence the private sector to adopt

more inclusive practices, while a second from the UK noted the perceptions that it was more costly to employ disabled staff. Where education personnel with disabilities were employed, most education trade unions were involved in negotiations on reasonable accommodations (e.g. Federazione UILSCUOLA RUA, Italy; TUI, Ireland).

In terms of social dialogue for persons with disabilities, solidarity over differentiation was again raised as an issue:

We fight for all employees / workers in the sector of education. We do not want to weaken the voice that “now we are speaking only for some” and “now we are speaking for everybody”. We fight for equal chances for all and for non-discrimination. (ČMOS PŠ, Czechia)

We do a lot for the integration of students with specific needs in mainstream education. But for staff with specific needs, we do little to nothing. (COV, Belgium)

For one employer organisation, the success of joint actions was ultimately down to the alignment of interests towards common goals “such as addressing labour shortages while promoting inclusion” (Center for support of inclusive education processes, Plovdiv Region, Bulgaria).

Despite the challenges, there had been **some developments for teachers with disabilities achieved through social dialogue**. For example, inclusive teacher recruitment campaigns (NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland), agreements on recruitment quotas (KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community), advocacy for reasonable accommodations (TUI, Ireland), ensuring company compliance with regulations on the employment of

persons with disabilities prior to being awarded a public tender (FECCOO, Spain), and ensuring that the collective agreement was inclusive (DAU-SEN, Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkish Cypriot Community). But, overall, this had had **little to no impact on disability representation** in the teaching workforce. Equally, the increased supply of education support personnel had also been an important agenda item for social dialogue (FLC CGIL, Italy; TUI, Ireland; WEF Bulgaria; SNES-FSU, France). In this regard, pay, status and working conditions were a particular focus for the education trade unions, but with only marginal gains:

Staff who support teachers, teams and students with specific needs in ordinary education have their own status and conditions of employment since 2023. (COV, Belgium)

The PDSZ has fought for the recruitment and the retention of ESP together with other organisations (civil and other unions) through demonstrations, continuously informing the media about the problems of education, and also through consultations with the government about the pay rise of all education workers. Although the present pay rise of teachers can be considered a partial success, we will still have to fight for the same for ESP. (PDSZ, Hungary)

Indeed, a particular challenge for SNES-FSU was the refusal of the French government to create a Category B civil service corps for educational support staff who worked with pupils with disabilities.

4.3.4. Professional Learning and Development

Inclusive education presents additional challenges to teachers' sense of self-efficacy; opportunities for professional learning and development in inclusion and special educational needs are paramount to addressing these self-perceptions (OECD, 2025). However, persons with disabilities often have less access to professional learning and development opportunities, which can be harmful to their career progression (Emira et al., 2016; Foster-Fischman et al., 2007).

The survey revealed that **professional learning and development for disability inclusion was one of two areas in which ETUCE and EFEE social partners were least likely to be engaged in action** (see Figure 7). The most common action on this topic was advocating for more qualified personnel to work with students with special educational needs and disabilities (61%) which, arguably, could be considered an issue for recruitment as much as for professional learning and development. However, less than half of the survey respondents conducted actions related to all other areas of professional learning and development, with less than one fifth engaged in actions oriented towards: (i) creating CPD opportunities on the use of assistive technologies (18%), (ii) creating targeted CPD for education personnel with disabilities (16%) and (iii) adapting initial preparation for education personnel with disabilities (see Figure 6). As with recruitment and retention, **those related to support for education personnel with disabilities scored the lowest**. Thus, while many organisations are advocating for more qualified staff to work with students with special needs and disabilities, they are much less likely to be involved in actions to ensure teachers are trained to work in inclusive classrooms or receive specific professional development for inclusion.

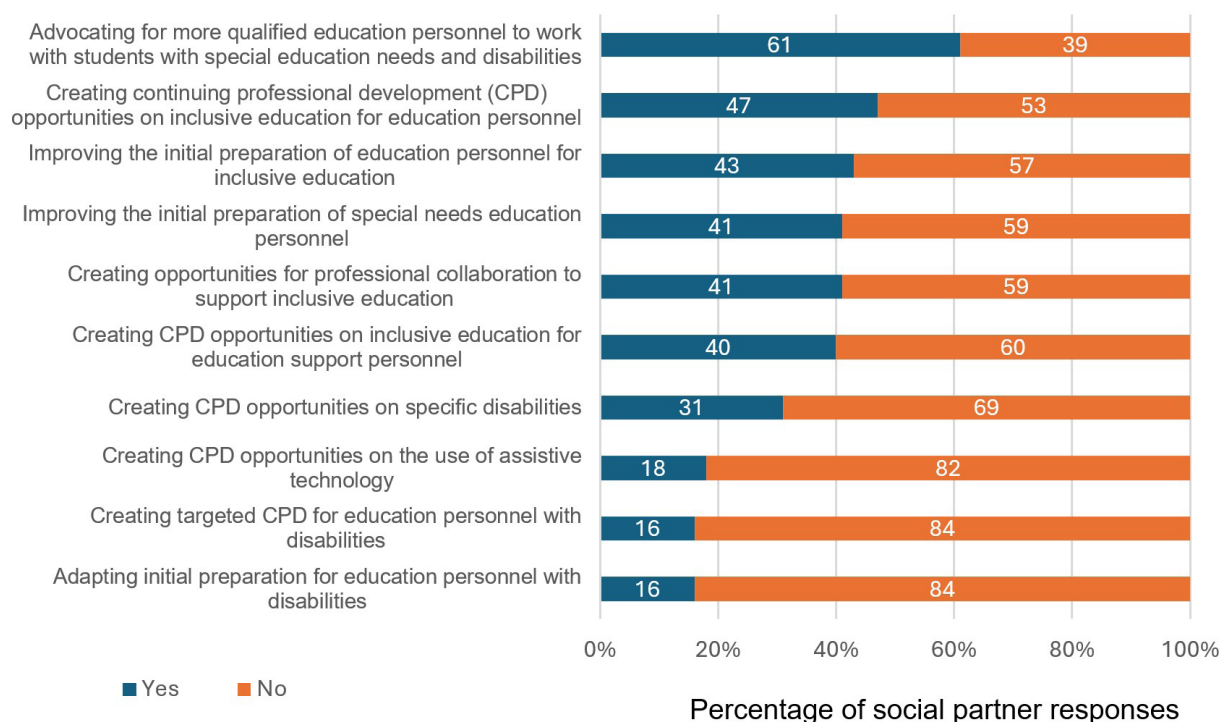
Analysis of the social partner responses revealed that just over half (51%) took no action whatsoever. Conversely, where action was taken, this was more likely to be done alone or with a non-social partner (31%) than with a social partner (14%). The low collaborative action with social partners is significant if we consider previous research conducted for ETUCE which highlights the importance of an extended bargaining agenda which incorporates professional issues (Stevenson et al., 2018). This means there is a disconnect between the increasing expectations placed on teachers in inclusive schools and the extent to which social partners advocate for training to enable them to meet these expectations.

When asked about the challenges for social dialogue on professional learning and development for inclusion, ETUCE and EFEE social partner responses included: **lack of funding for CPD** (NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community; UESCK/SBASHK, Kosovo; Federazione UILSCUOLA RUA, Italy;

Trade Union of Education of Montenegro; DAU-SEN, Eastern Mediterranean University, Turkish Cypriot Community; University of Dunaújváros, Hungary; University of Szeged, Hungary; Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb, Croatia), and **lack of government interest in** (PDSZ, Hungary) or **low prioritisation of special education** (NEU, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; SNES-FSU, France).

Respondents highlighted that there were **differences of opinion on social dialogue on professional learning and development** (Ministry For Education, Sport, Youth, Research & Innovation, Malta; Go! Onderwijs Van De Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Netherlands). Some education trade unions noted that CPD was negotiated within collective agreements (e.g. BUPL, Denmark). However, in certain contexts, it was not considered an issue for social dialogue (Algemene Onderwijsbond, Netherlands), fell within the remit of higher education policy or was determined at school level where the choice of course content was often at the discretion of the individual.

Figure 7. Survey Responses for Action on Professional Learning and Development



We do not usually take a stand in the detailed contents of teacher education curriculum as it is a matter of university autonomy. However, we have advocated for the need of equipping all teachers with sufficient skills to face diversity. In general, we can agree upon this message with our social partners, but we tend to have difference of opinions when taking this into practice, e.g. decree on qualifications. Possibilities for CPD are included in collective bargaining - for instance, in basic education and general upper secondary education all teachers are required to participate in CPD or organisation's planning work for 18 hours. However, the agreements do not determine in detail how this resource is allocated (e.g. themes). (Finnish Education Employers – Sivista)

Even when CPD was available, education personnel might not wish to participate (FECCOO, Spain; OLTEK, Cyprus) or be discouraged due to a lack of time and incentives. The general lack of professional development courses was also identified as problematic (ASTI, Ireland).

There is not always sufficient awareness among higher education stakeholders of the importance of inclusion and how professional development can contribute to inclusion. Structural problems in higher education, such as overburdened teaching staff, bureaucratic obstacles and time constraints, hinder progress on inclusion and

professional development. Inclusion training is not always available for higher education teachers and administrators. (University of Dunaújváros, Hungary)

The Department of Education has improved its communications strategy to inform teachers of CPD opportunities provided by its agencies. All free of charge but the difficulty is getting teacher release from school to attend due to supply problems. (ASTI, Ireland)

In terms of outcomes and successes, some respondents mentioned that dialogue was 'ongoing'. However, others had nothing to report in terms of major outcomes.

4.3.5. Pay and Working Conditions

Pay and working conditions were treated as two discrete areas of possible action. In general, the survey revealed no significant prioritisation of one area over the other in ETUCE and EFEE social partners' patterns of engagement. Nonetheless, this topic area had **the highest scoring item across the whole survey with 83% of organisations indicating that they took actions to advocate for improved pay for education personnel in general** (see Figure 8). This is perhaps not so surprising; pay and working conditions are the bread-and-butter issues of social partner collective bargaining, and pay has become an even greater concern for education stakeholders in the context of a teacher recruitment and retention crisis and wider social inequalities caused by inflation and the cost-of-living crisis across Europe. As with the topic of education funding, the focus is on education personnel in general. This is also supported by the next highest scoring item in this area which indicated that just under two

thirds (64%) of respondents advocated for planning and preparation time for education personnel *in general*. Advocating for planning and preparation for education personnel who work with students with special educational needs and disabilities also scored quite highly with just less than half of respondents engaged in such action (45%).

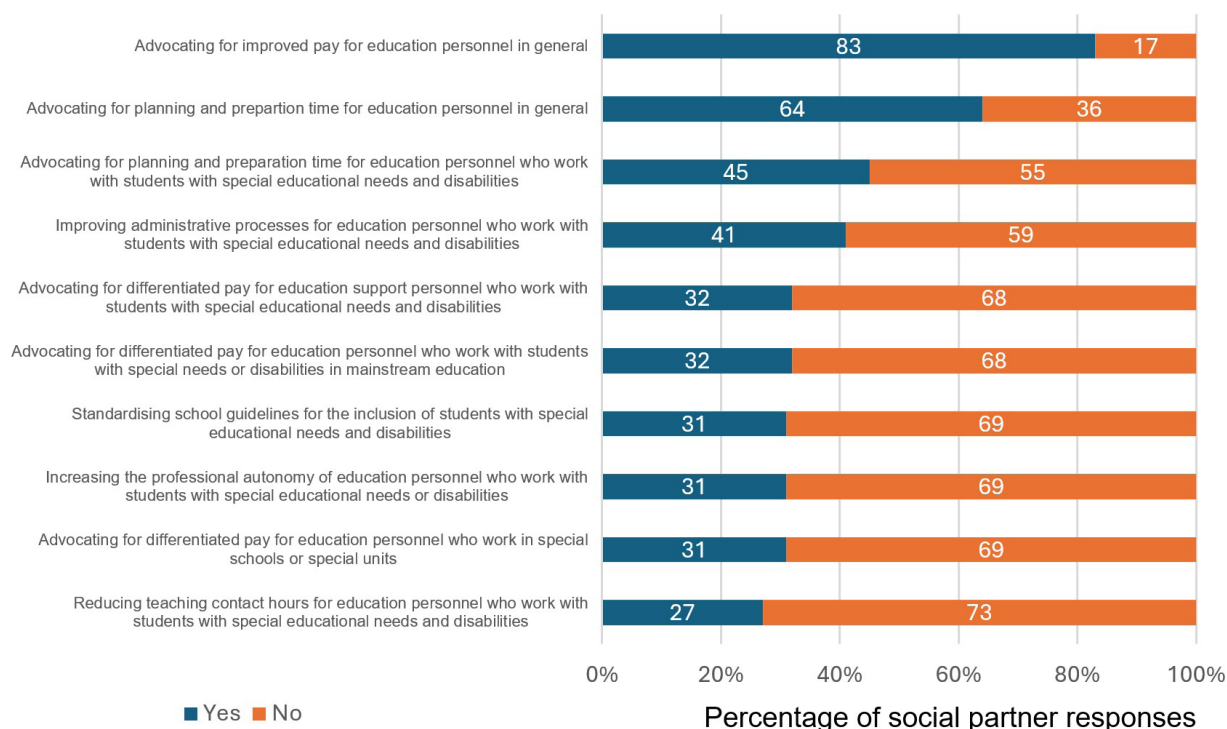
Overall, these findings underline the fact that the big-ticket issues for ETUCE and EFEE social partners are **system-level concerns**, which extend beyond specific challenges for inclusive education. Significantly, **some of the lowest scoring actions related to differentiated pay and working conditions** for education personnel and education support personnel who worked with students with special educational needs and disabilities (in mainstream and special education) – less than one third (32%) of respondents engaged in such actions. Although some degree of policy prioritisation could also relate to education trade unions’ concern for solidarity over differentiation, it could be argued that education personnel that work with

students with the most severe needs should be recognised for the additional teaching and non-teaching workload challenges this entails e.g. through additional remuneration or reduced contact. Nonetheless, the priority action areas – although broad in their reach – do have the potential to contribute positively to the implementation of inclusive education, albeit in a less targeted way.

Analysis of the social partners’ responses revealed that 24% undertook action with a social partner and 21% undertook action with a non-social partner. Perhaps the most interesting finding here was that 50% of the actions on pay and working conditions had no type of engagement whatsoever. While pay seems to be a high priority for social dialogue, this does not seem to extend to differentiated pay to acknowledge the demanding working conditions of inclusive classrooms.

Low education funding was again highlighted as one of the most significant factors in social partners’ capacity to engage in social dialogue on pay and working conditions. In

Figure 8. Survey Responses for Action on Pay and Working Conditions



certain contexts, sectoral social dialogue was complicated by the fact that salary scales were standardised across the public sector (e.g. Cyprus) or were determined by other government departments (e.g. Ireland).

Education trade union respondents expressed **a concern for the pay and working conditions of all education personnel** (e.g. Federazione UILSCUOLA RUA, Italy). Therefore, **pay differentiation was uncommon – even resisted – for those working with students with special educational needs** (e.g. OLTEK, Cyprus; Teachers’ Union of Ireland; LEETU, Lithuania). However, the lower professional status of certain education personnel was a challenge to pay equality (UESCK/SBASHK, Kosovo). Furthermore, several unions argued that the workload and responsibilities of teachers in inclusive mainstream classrooms were little understood:

There is a lack of awareness and knowledge of the nature of the what the workers do, there is a lack of understanding on the real needs students of disabilities have and of the variety of situations that arise. There is a tendency to view disability in a one size fits all box rather than any awareness of the specific needs of learners with different types of disabilities. (FECCOO, Spain)

The main obstacle remains the completely distorted perception held by political leaders and senior civil servants. They are unaware of the difficulties teachers face. They do not listen to what we are telling them. Moreover, support personnel with disabilities are very poorly paid. (CFDT Education Formation Recherche Publiques, France)

Teachers and support staff working with students with special educational needs and disabilities often face higher workloads. Financial limitations are a major challenge, with governments often citing budget constraints as a reason for not increasing salaries or improving working conditions. (LEETU, Lithuania)

Several ETUCE and EFEE social partners noted that teachers had received pay increases in recent years. These increases included, or were focused on, education personnel who worked specifically with students with special educational needs and disabilities (e.g. KTÖS, Turkish Cypriot Community; Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research & Innovation, Malta; Center for support of inclusive education processes - Plovdiv Region, Bulgaria). However, some were implemented on condition of teachers’ cooperation with policy implementation (ASTI, Ireland) or teaching assistants’ participation in CPD (Odborový zväz školstva, Slovakia). **In several contexts, increases were only achieved through industrial action** (e.g. PDSZ, Hungary). Beyond pay, education trade unions wrote of changes to terms and conditions of employment.

In 2021, ESTUFM negotiated with the Ministry of Education and included in our Collective Agreement (2021-2025) the provision that employees from education (only our trade union members) can have 3 more free days to their annual leave, in case they take care of a family member with severe or accentuated disabilities. (Education and Science Trade Union Federation of Moldova)

However, some education trade unions reported no results on pay and working conditions whatsoever (Federazione UILSCUOLA RUA, Italy; CFDT Education Formation Recherche Publiques, France).

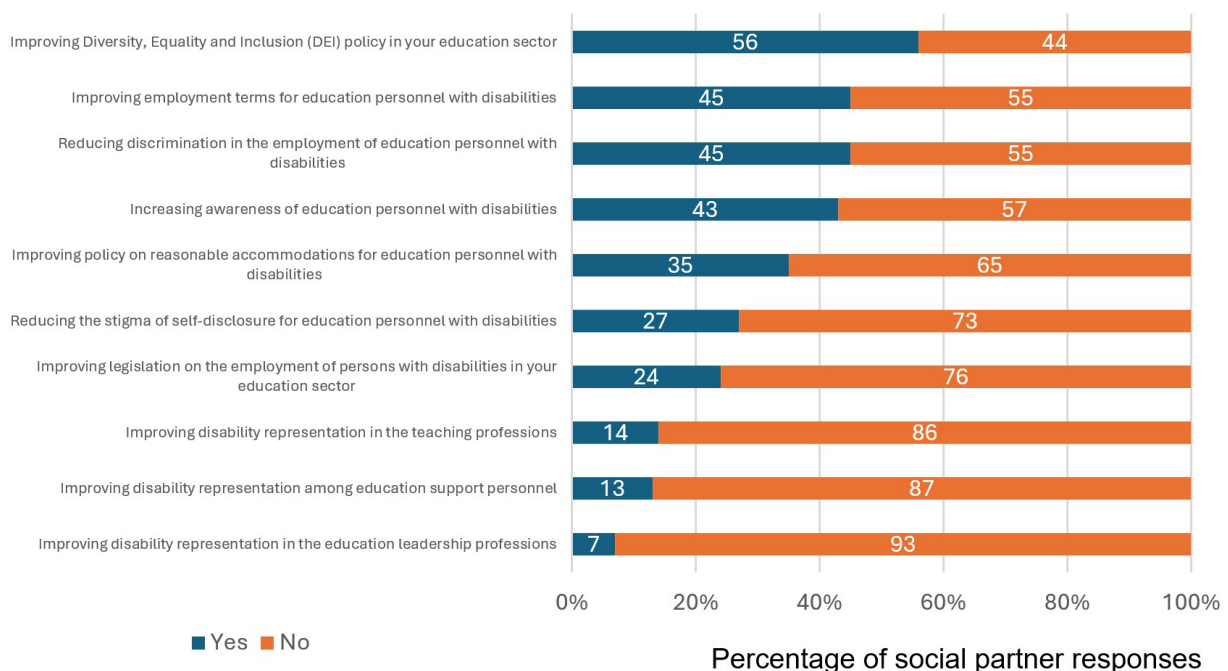
4.3.6. Disability Equality and Anti-Discrimination

Disability equality and anti-discrimination was the second area in which ETUCE and EFEE social partners were least likely to be active (see Figure 9). Positively, just over one half of respondent social partners (56%) had engaged in actions to improve policy related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in the education sector. Moreover, just under one half had targeted actions towards education personnel with disabilities: (i) improving employment terms for education personnel with disabilities (45%), (ii) reducing discrimination in the employment of education personnel with disabilities (45%) and (iii) increasing awareness of

education personnel with disabilities (43%). While quite modest, the percentages could in fact represent a significant proportion of the 69% of respondents who indicated that they represented education personnel with disabilities. Conversely, **three of the weakest areas of action on disability inclusion related to disability representation: less than one in five organisations is working to improve disability representation in the teaching professions (14%), among education support personnel (13%), and in the education leadership professions (7%).**

Analysis of the social partner responses revealed that just over two thirds (67%) took no action on DEI whatsoever. Of those organisations that did undertake action, most of this was conducted alone or with a non-social partner (17%). Only one in ten is engaged in action with their social partners through social dialogue. Again, this low action through social dialogue is significant. Joint actions on issues related to DEI have the potential to be transformative to the individual organisations and wider society.

Figure 9. Survey Responses for Action on Disability Equality and Anti-Discrimination



When asked about the challenges to social dialogue on disability equality and anti-discrimination, ETUCE and EFEE member organisations raised a range of issues. One major factor was that **disability was not a priority for social dialogue**. Several also reflected on **the current political context** which was either a) in transition or b) hostile/resistant to DEI initiatives entirely.

It is not easy to promote diversity, equality and inclusion issues in Moldova nowadays, because of a lot of other problems that were always considered as important. Moldova is at the beginning of the European Integration process, and we do believe that DEI will become a social dialogue topics indeed and more attention will be paid to these issues. (Education and Science Trade Union Federation of Moldova)

The Hungarian government is not at all open for dialogues on the topic of inclusion, equality or diversity. The lack of teachers in the sector is so huge, that we are far from being able to talk about the decrease of workload even in the case of the average teaching staff. (PDSZ, Hungary)

Even in contexts where DEI legislation was strong, challenges persisted in its implementation and enforcement (FECCOO, Spain), as well as in getting “personalised responses to the needs of individuals” (ASTI, Ireland). Some noted issues related to institutional discrimination in education (TUI, Ireland; Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary), the lack of disability advocacy organisations to support inclusion (Simmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary), a limited understanding of the value people

with disabilities can bring to organisations and the insufficient training of social partners on disability-related topics (Center for support of inclusive education processes - Plovdiv Region, Bulgaria). For one education trade union, disability inclusion would likely become a significant topic for social dialogue in the future.

Given the current conditions, and the fact that many educators joined the armed forces and went to fight against the aggressor, many of them may return and are already returning with injuries and disabilities. Therefore, improving the policy on reasonable accommodation for educators with disabilities, improving legislation on the employment of people with disabilities in the education sector, protecting their rights and interests in the workplace etc. will be increasingly raised in society in general and in our organization in particular. (Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine)

Given the lack of prioritisation, **outcomes were limited** and included increased disability awareness (Ireland), quotas for disability-inclusive employment (Bulgaria), a legal framework for the protection of persons with disabilities (Bulgaria) and increased labour market integration of persons with disabilities (Hungary).

4.4. Types of Social Dialogue by Topic

As noted in the analysis, the level of social partner engagement in social dialogue on disability inclusion in education – whether for students or education personnel – varied widely. The levels of engagement are compared Table 2. Although there is low engagement in most areas of action, **education trade unions and employer organisations clearly share common concerns on disability inclusion, making joint action both appropriate and necessary.** However, given the particular challenges faced by teachers in inclusive mainstream classrooms, it is notable that relatively little social partner dialogue focuses on professional learning and development or pay and working conditions. In many education systems, inclusive education policies have been implemented with limited attention to teachers’ professional needs and the more complex classroom environments in which they work.

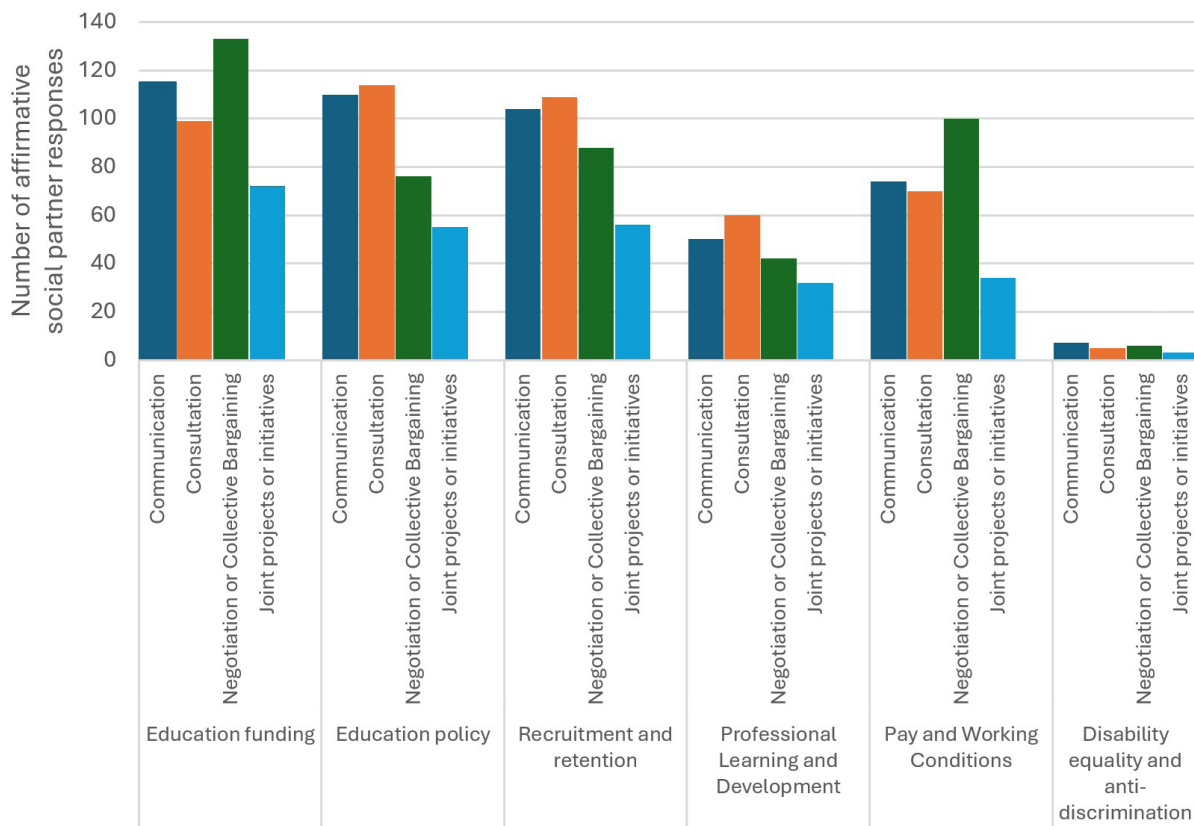
To understand the quality of this social dialogue, we analysed the types of social dialogue in which social partners engaged on these topic areas. From this analysis, we can see that there is again some variation (see Figure 10). Across most areas, **social dialogue primarily takes the form of communication and consultation.** However, respondents indicated **higher levels of collective bargaining on education funding and pay and working conditions.**

Joint projects or initiatives – where social partners have the potential to collaborate outside the formal mechanisms of collective bargaining and policy development – are **the type of social dialogue in which social partners engaged least.** This is significant given that joint actions offer the potential to improve disability awareness, remove cultural barriers and have a wider societal impact. Moreover, **engagement is generally low across all types of social dialogue on professional learning and very low on disability equality and anti-discrimination.**

Table 2. Area of Action and Percentage Engaged in Social Dialogue

Area of action	Percentage of social partners engaged in social dialogue on this area of action
Education funding	38%
Education policy	31%
Recruitment and retention	27%
Professional learning and development	14%
Pay and working conditions	24%
Disability equality and anti-discrimination	10%

Figure 10. Types of Social Dialogue by Topic



4.5. Conclusion

As noted in Chapter 3, Stevenson et al. (2022) have identified five characteristics of effective social dialogue: resources, architecture, legitimacy, objectives and relationships. If we analyse the survey responses on the challenges to social dialogue on disability inclusion in relation to these characteristics, it is clear that there some areas in need of development.

In terms of resources, many ETUCE and EFEE social partners **lacked designated personnel for disability inclusion** and persons with disabilities to support policy development. Moreover, **the lack of data** on education personnel with disabilities and inclusive and special education funding restricts policy and strategy work.

In terms of architecture, several social partner respondents pointed to **weaknesses and/or limited coordination within the social partnership**. These issues were compounded by the fact that special and inclusive education funding is allocated through different mechanisms at different levels of education systems. More broadly, inclusive and special education depends on effective cooperation between the education, health and social care sectors, which in many contexts remains weak.

Legitimacy appears to be one of the major issues for social dialogue on disability inclusion in education. Many ETUCE and EFEE organisations noted that inclusive education and disability equality were not considered topics for social dialogue or priorities for public expenditure. There were similar issues with professional learning and development

– which was often devolved to universities and schools – and education policy more broadly. In terms of the latter, some of this can be explained by **a lack of consensus over definitions of disability, disability inclusion and inclusive education**, which often occurs in a broader context of resistance to DEI.

In terms of objectives, many ETUCE and EFEE member organisations pointed to a lack of shared vision for inclusive education. Equally, there was **limited enforcement** of policy goals, which meant that stakeholders were often disappointed with the outcomes of social dialogue. Some of these issues were related to differences of opinion on the meaning and objectives of inclusive education e.g. in historically segregated systems.

Finally, **relationships between social partners were sometimes weak**. In many contexts, social dialogue on industrial issues is generally difficult. Beyond this, social partners noted that there were **few organisations with which they could collaborate on joint actions**.

Overall, this suggests many opportunities to develop both the social partnership, the systems and structures of industrial relations and the key items for the agenda for social dialogue.

CASE STUDY: GERMANY

5.1. Disability in Germany

5.1.1. Legal Definitions of Disability

According to Article 3, Section 3 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (German Constitution), “No person shall be disfavoured because of disability” (Cited in Kock, 2004). The legal framework for disability policy in Germany is based on the Social Code Book (Sozialgesetzbuch or SGB) (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2024a) – and primarily SGB IX – and the Act on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz or BGG) (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2024b). The former was first introduced in 2001 and regulates the rehabilitation and participation of persons with disabilities, including disability assessment, benefits and services. Conversely, the latter protects the rights of persons with disabilities in federal institutions through **the legal principles of anti-discrimination and accessibility**. Within this legislation, disability is defined as a lasting deviation in physical, mental or psychological functions that restricts participation in social life (Kock, 2004; Degener, 2006). This definition thus maintains **an impairment-centred legal framework**. The SGB IX and BGG have undergone substantial revision – most notably through the Federal Participation Act (Bundesteilhabegesetz), which was rolled out between 2016 and 2020, and following ratification of the UN CRPD in 2009. However, the basic structure of the definition continues to link impairment with participation restriction, even as wider policy reforms expand disability participation rights and procedural safeguards.

Disability policy is not solely understood through legal conditions. Perspectives of, and approaches to, disability in society are also shaped by what is considered ‘normal’ as well as disability social movements’ struggle for rights and recognition (Waldschmidt, 2018).



5

5.1.2. Translation into Practice

Germany's ratification of the UN CRPD strengthened the shift toward participation-oriented rights. However, **the rights-based mandate for disability inclusion has translated unevenly into practice**. In terms of education specifically, there is a pronounced break between primary and secondary education: inclusion rates are markedly higher in primary schools than in secondary schools, and a large proportion of pupils labelled with special educational needs leave school without even the lowest secondary certificate (Hauptschulabschluss). This educational pattern narrows later vocational and educational opportunities and points to **a structural contradiction between inclusion commitments under international and constitutional law and a tracked, ability-hierarchical school system** that continues to route many disabled pupils into low-status pathways (Niemeyer, 2014).

5.2. Disability Data in Germany

In 2024, approximately 29.9% of Germans aged 16 or over reported some or severe activity limitation (disability). While this figure has remained relatively stable over time, it is slightly above the EU average (24.5%) (Eurostat, 2025a). In contrast to EU data, official disability statistics in Germany are based on individuals who have obtained **a severely disabled person's pass** (Schwerbehindertenausweis). Severe disability is assessed by the **degree of disability** (Grad der Behinderung or GdB) which is measured on a scale from 20 to 100. According to this assessment, an impairment must be physical, mental, or psychological, last longer than six months and restrict participation in social life. Individuals with GdB ≥ 50 are categorised as severely disabled, although those with GdB 30-40 can have equal status if their disability

makes it difficult for them to find or keep employment. Obtaining the official disability pass is important since it grants a disabled person access to **rights and benefits** (e.g., tax reductions, additional leave, employment protections, free public transport) (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, n.d.).

5.3. Inclusion in education

5.3.1. Education Governance and Finance

In the Federal Republic of Germany, **the federal states (Länder) have primary responsibility for the education system**. This authority grants them full legislative and administrative powers across the school, higher, adult and continuing education sectors, unless otherwise granted to the

Federal Government through the Basic Law (Grundgesetz). Detailed regulations are written in the constitutions of the states and individual laws related to the specific education sectors. The states are also responsible for laws on the teaching profession, including pay and pensions. Federal Government responsibility for education, science and research lies with the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung - BMBF); however, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth is responsible for early childhood education and care. The BMBF consults with the states, and inter-state cooperation ensures harmonisation and mobility. The Agreement on the Common Basic Structure of the School System and the Responsibility of the Federal States for Key Educational Policy Issues (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2020) was adopted in October 2020 and provides a common framework for cooperation on issues of

quality assurance, school system organisation, and teacher training (Eurydice, 2025a).

The political-administrative system consists of three governance levels: (1) Federal Government, (2) federal states (Länder) and (3) local authorities (Kommunen)⁸. Decisions on education funding are taken across all three levels, although roughly **90% of public expenditure is provided by the states and the local authorities**. In 2024, the public sector allocated €191.5 billion to the education system, corresponding to 4.5% of GDP (Eurydice, 2025a), which is slightly below the EU average of 4.6% (Eurostat).

During the focus group interview, education personnel repeatedly highlighted **the low state expenditure on education**. There was a widespread perception that this underinvestment affected both the attractiveness of the profession and the quality of teaching and learning environments. Union officials particularly noted how **insufficient human resources undermined the policy vision for inclusive education**. As one official commented:

All children should be taught together, but there has to be the right environment, and we need the resources to do that. So, we have the issue with the lack of teachers, and we have problems with many children and big classes. So, there are difficulties doing what we all want to. And this is what we fight for and what we try to bring to the discussion – that we need to do something about this. And we have to do something to make sure that we can practice inclusion in the schools. So, it's an issue still. It's not the way we want it to be. (Union official, VBE)

⁸ Districts, municipalities with the status of a district and municipalities forming part of districts

5.3.2. Education Structure and Access

Compulsory education typically begins at age six (but can start earlier or later, if it is in the interests of the child) and comprises nine or ten years (depending on the state or educational path) of full-time schooling. On completion of **primary education (Grundschule)**, students are usually allocated to one of three secondary pathways:

- **Hauptschule (Grades 5–10)**, traditionally preparing students for vocational training in manual or service occupations
- **Realschule (Grades 5–10)**, offering an intermediate pathway leading to a broader range of vocational and technical qualifications
- **Gymnasium (Grades 5–12/13)**, culminating in the Abitur and qualification for university entry.

Additionally, many states operate **Gesamtschulen**, which integrate multiple tracks within a single institution and allow for more flexible student progression. **Private schools** only educate a small proportion of students in Germany (Kellems et al., 2024).

The structure and status of school types vary across regions. Student placement into a specific secondary track is influenced by **academic performance** and, in certain states, **teacher recommendations and/or parental choice**. Despite persistent international criticism of early tracking, strong public support for the system remains (Kellems et al., 2024).

Special education in Germany has historically developed alongside, rather than within, mainstream schooling. Its origins can be traced back to the 1920s **Hilfsschulen (remedial schools)** which were designed to provide differentiated instruction for students

with disabilities and often explicitly aimed to prepare them for low-wage, manual work. With their simplified curricula and segregated instructional methods, these schools laid the foundation for the subsequent development of **Sonderschulen (special schools)** (Kellems et al., 2024).

A major institutional consolidation took place in 1960, when the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (Kultusministerkonferenz or KMK) established a formal framework for special education, introducing distinct school types for students with visual, hearing, speech, behavioural, intellectual and physical disabilities. Although terminology has shifted – Sonderschulen are now referred to as **Förderschulen (special needs schools)** – the structural logic of segregation remains largely intact (Kellems et al., 2024).

Despite policy commitments to inclusive education since the 1990s, **Germany continues to rely heavily on segregated special education**. Approximately 577,000 students attend one of seven categories of special schools, which comprise 2,800 institutions employing more than 68,000 education personnel. This lack of progress on inclusion can be attributed to broader political contestations regarding the nature of disability and the expectations about students with disabilities both in education and in relation to their future participation in the labour market (Kellems et al., 2024). These dynamics were reflected in our focus group interview where, despite general support for inclusion, there were differences in opinion over its practical implementation.

There is no separate federal funding mechanism for special education; **resources for both special and inclusive education are drawn from the general education budget**. Special education structures vary between states, but institutions are required to provide appropriate technical equipment, specialised teaching materials and, where relevant, therapeutic, nursing or social

support. Förderschulen are designed to support transitions to mainstream schools or vocational pathways (Eurydice, 2025a). In this context of constrained resources, **the possibility for inclusion is also linked to professional roles and expectations**. As one municipal representative highlighted:

We often talk about “teachers for the special children,” but I want to emphasise that all our teachers are teachers for all children...we must not keep separating roles in our thinking. The special education teacher is not the only one responsible for children with special needs while the regular teacher teaches the “normal” children. No — we are all responsible for all children. That is how inclusion works. And I do not think it is helpful to differentiate between teachers in this way. (Municipality representative)

Available data suggest **an overall increase in the number of learners with special educational needs in mainstream primary and secondary schools** over the past two decades, although variations in definitions and reporting practices across the federal states make precise comparisons difficult (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2023). **Approximately half of these secondary students attend Hauptschule**, the lowest academic track, which offers limited long-term educational and labour-market opportunities (Kellems et al., 2024).

Students requiring additional support are typically referred by teachers or parents. This initiates a formal assessment procedure, including educational, psychological, and developmental evaluations, to determine whether a student meets the criteria for special educational needs. Assessment outcomes are translated into **individualised**

support plans outlining pedagogical adaptations, therapeutic interventions and assistive technologies. However, **the availability and quality of support depends heavily on the resources and organisational arrangements of individual federal states and municipalities** (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2023). The process can be slow and administratively complex, and formal procedures do not normally advance without the consent of parents (although it can be initiated without consent), who may worry that an official label could stigmatise their child or constrain their future opportunities. As one of the VBE participants described:

Very often some of the parents say, no, my child is not disabled...And at the care center, it is the case that for a child, a minor, the application for severe disability can only be made if both parents, also with separated married couples, if both parents sign. And then it starts to get difficult when one parent says, no, my child is not disabled, I have a completely normal child, and I don't want to use the benefits that could result from it. (Union official, VBE)

5.3.3. Educational Attainment Levels of Persons with Disabilities

As across Europe, persons with disabilities (some or severe activity limitation) in Germany are less likely to attain a tertiary education than those without disabilities (Eurostat, 2025d). They are also more likely to leave education early or to be not in employment, education or training, demonstrating a persistent structural inequality in educational progression (Eurostat, 2025b, 2025c).

A more detailed examination of qualification levels reveals that **almost twice as many young people with disabilities leave school without any general certificate** compared to those without disabilities (6.0% vs. 3.2%). Likewise, over half of students with disabilities (50.7%) exit school with only a Hauptschule qualification, compared to just 30.7% of those without disabilities. At the other end of the attainment scale, only around 12% of students with disabilities achieved the Abitur, compared to 27% among students without disabilities (European Commission, 2021b).

Table 3. Population in Private Households by Levels of Educational Attainment and Disability (Activity Limitation) in Germany (Eurostat 2025b)

Educational attainment	Less than primary, primary and lower secondary (ISCED levels 0-2)		Upper secondary non-tertiary general education (ISCED levels 3-4)		Upper secondary non-tertiary vocational (ISCED levels 3-4)		Tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-6)	
	Some or severe	None	Some or severe	None	Some or severe	None	Some or severe	None
Germany	24.5%	18.7%	4.0%	7.3%	50.2%	39.6%	21.4%	34.3%
EU27	32.9%	22.5%	9.0%	13.1%	36.6%	30.8%	21.4%	33.6%

5.3.4. Teachers, Specialists and Education Support Personnel

The 16 federal states in Germany are individually responsible for organising the education of new teachers. The KMK has a coordination role for teacher education and recognises **six types of teacher qualification, including one specifically for special education**. Teacher education combines subject-specific study with pedagogical coursework and a mandatory teaching internship. While special educators typically complete their internships in special education schools, internships in general or inclusive settings have become increasingly common in recent years (Liebner and Schmaltz, 2021). Special education teachers can also train in the inclusive school settings in which they are employed. Despite this, the KMK emphasises that **teachers have primary responsibility for creating inclusive learning environments**:

At any school, it is the teachers who will create an environment in which diversity is acknowledged and appreciated as normality and as a strength. Teachers need professional competences to allow them to recognise learners' special gifts and any disadvantages, impediments and other obstacles that they might exhibit or experience and to put in place appropriate pedagogical measures for prevention or support. (German Rectors' Conference and Kultusministerkonferenz, 2015)

Nonetheless, focus group participants expressed concern that the policy aspirations were difficult to realise in everyday school contexts. They stressed that the **limited availability of trained special educators**

means that inclusive support is often fragmented and insufficient:

The problem is that when special school teachers go into the classes, they only go into the class for two, three, four hours within a week. That's a drop in the ocean. That's not much. We just don't have the time. We are busy with ... keeping the shop running and taking care of the children who are currently having a problem. In addition, through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we also have children who come into the classes without support. (Union official, VBE)

Despite a comprehensive university-based teacher education, strong professional status, job security and clearly structured career pathways, **Germany is currently experiencing severe and worsening teacher shortages**. These structural challenges, combined with limited capacity of teacher education programmes, were central themes in our focus group. Indeed, participants described **a growing reliance on unqualified personnel** who were already responsible for teaching, alongside hopes that some of these individuals would eventually enter formal teacher training. As one VBE official explained:

There are two major challenges. First, we simply do not have enough qualified teachers. Schools increasingly rely on people who have not been trained as teachers, and we must requalify them on the job. But that does not mean they are prepared to support children with special educational needs. These children often require highly specialised expertise, yet

we have fewer and fewer professionals available to provide it. Second, pupils today present more complex behavioural and emotional needs, partly because of broader social changes and shifting family circumstances. So, while the number of children who need professional support is increasing, the number of professionally trained staff is decreasing. We want to promote inclusion, but these conditions work directly against that ambition. (Union official, VBE)

Yes, during school holidays, they can compensate for this, but if they also end up working weekends, then they simply burn out.
(Municipality representative)

Both union representatives and municipal leaders recognised that reducing work pressures is a necessary precondition for the effective implementation of inclusive education.

In addition to staff shortages, **teacher workload was a recurring concern**. One municipal representative described the pressure that teachers experience on a daily basis:

Teachers have a mandatory teaching load. In elementary schools, that is 28 hours per week. In secondary schools, it is similar, around 25–28 hours, depending on the school type. But teaching is only part of the job. Teachers also have to prepare lessons and fulfil many additional duties: parent-teacher meetings, excursions, conferences, support conferences, writing support plans. All of this happens outside of classroom teaching. Studies show that, even if teachers only work during the week and keep weekends free, their weekly workload already reaches 40–52 hours, sometimes even 60 hours during exam periods.

5.3.5. The Challenges to Disability Inclusive Education

Despite the legal and policy developments, **several challenges hinder the realisation of inclusive education in Germany**. Schools differ considerably in how they combine general and special education, and the persistence of separate special schools limits academic and career pathways for many students with disabilities (Kellems et al., 2024). While research shows positive cognitive outcomes from inclusion, negative peer comparisons and risks of social isolation can limit full participation (e.g. Heyder et al., 2020). Financial pressures add further difficulties; many mainstream schools lack stable funding for the specialised resources required to accommodate learners effectively. Teacher attitudes and experiences also shape outcomes: when teachers hold more positive views about inclusion, students report stronger social belonging (Heyder et al., 2020).

A central structural barrier lies in the early and ability-based tracking system, which continues to direct many students with disabilities into the lowest-status secondary track (Hauptschule), limiting their opportunities for future education and employment (Niemeyer, 2014). In this sense, the education system can unintentionally reproduce inequalities, as students who

require additional support face higher barriers when trying to access higher-level educational pathways.

5.4. Disability-Inclusive Employment in Education

The 2020–2021 European Semester report noted that persons with disabilities in Germany continue to have comparatively low employment rates and limited participation in society. To promote participation in the regular labour market, Germany operates a **quota system** that requires companies with more than 20 employees to ensure that **at least 5% of their workforce** consists of people with severe disabilities; enterprises that do not meet this requirement must pay a **compensatory levy**. However, many employers either fail to meet the quota or choose to pay the levy. While a number of regulations exist to support workplace accommodations and accessibility for severely disabled employees, **Germany still lacks a comprehensive legal right to reasonable accommodation and a consistent, nationwide framework to guarantee accessibility at work** (European Commission, 2021b).

In 2024, the **disability employment gap** in Germany was 22.0%, which is 2.0% lower than the EU27 average. While rates have fluctuated in the past decade, this represents the lowest gap since 2014 (Eurostat, 2025e). In the 2020–2021 European Semester report, it was noted that, across the working lifespan (ages 15–65), persons with disabilities have substantially lower employment rates than those without disabilities, with the gap widening in mid-career and among women — indicating **persistent structural barriers** to their long-term labour-market inclusion (European Commission, 2021b).

A union official and municipal representative described how those with a more severe degree of disability were supported in Solingen, where there is a **well-established institutional infrastructure** providing targeted workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities, including access to funding for transportation, assistive technologies, and personalised workplace adaptations. The municipal representative worked with Landschaftsverband Rheinland, the local authority which provides funding, and frequently visited workplaces to assess what support was needed:

A recent example at a school involved ensuring a person with a wheelchair and a “severely disabled” ID card could physically get to work, even without being able to use public transport. In that case, we financed transportation by taxi. (Municipality representative)

Conversely, several focus group participants noted that **invisible or undiagnosed disabilities**, particularly neurodivergence and chronic health conditions, could sometimes go unaddressed, even despite ongoing conversations between the trade union and the school authority. An additional concern was **teachers’ ill health as a result of workplace demands**. As one VBE official emphasised:

Mental health challenges are also a big issue. Because of the high workload, many teachers experience psychological strain. We try to support them, for example, by reducing teaching hours, assigning them to quieter groups, or avoiding particularly stressful class situations. At the local level, we can make small adjustments that make school life more

manageable....Some teachers are out sick for long periods and then return gradually with reduced hours. We help them identify suitable conditions, for example, no parent meetings or no stressful conferences at first. We check everything carefully to ensure that their reintegration into school is as smooth as possible. (Union official, VBE)

Several participants noted that **inclusive education generated an increased workload** – extensive bureaucracy and communication with parents – which could extend into evenings or weekends and **negatively affect wellbeing**. While education personnel were aware that some colleagues may require reasonable accommodations, the **structural pressures caused by staff shortages** reduced capacity for early identification, sustained support, and proactive planning.

Beyond this, it is important to consider the German education system which limits the opportunities for students with disabilities to remain on the academic pathways required for teacher education. This structural dynamic likely contributes to the limited visibility of teachers with disabilities in schools.

5.5. Social Dialogue on Disability Inclusion

In North Rhine-Westphalia, social dialogue between the municipal administrators and the education trade unions is **well-established**, and plays **an important role in supporting both employees and the development of inclusive schools**. Collaboration between employers, unions, and staff representatives on inclusion practices is a continuous process.

A key precondition for effective social dialogue at the local level is **the participation of all relevant stakeholders at multiple levels of the education system**. As one VBE official explained:

We also work closely with internal staff representatives — in the local staff councils, the district staff councils, and the main staff councils. These levels are structured hierarchically: the main staff council at the Ministry, the district staff council at the district government, and the local staff council at the school office. We include representatives from unions such as VBE and GEW, as well as other relevant unions depending on the school. Within the staff council, we usually try to ensure representation from all professional groups — for example, special education teachers, social educators, salaried employees, and civil servants. We also ensure that both older and younger colleagues are represented. The goal is that everyone should have an appropriate contact person they can turn to. This structure mirrors the organisation on the administration side — at the level of the Ministry, the district government, or the school office — and on our side, where unions or staff groups are similarly represented, so that all professions and needs have a face and a voice in the system. (Union official, VBE)

Through this multi-layered system of representation, teachers and education support personnel have **clear channels of engagement** through which they could influence decisions on working conditions and the organisation of inclusive education. Such structures also promote democratic participation by ensuring that **professional diversity is reflected at the bargaining table**.

Another VBE official emphasised the importance of grounding their contribution to social dialogue in the experiences of education personnel but noted that **the union voice could have varied impact on policy outcomes**:

You are often asked, you are heard, but unfortunately not always everything that you suggest is included in politics and in realisations. And that would often be better because we are, of course, the voice of practice. We are talking with each other. We are in school ourselves. I am a representative school principal myself. I get the life in school every day...So, we have many in the union who are really at the base and can talk about it. And we develop suggestions from this, know what's going on. And it is also heard, but it is not always included. That's a shame. (Union official, VBE)

An important outcome of social dialogue is the practical support for teachers, particularly those in need of accommodations such as those returning to work. In such cases, union officials and employers sit together in **“participation conversation” (Beteiligungsgespräch)**, a formal or structured dialogue about workplace issues. This enabled the social partners to ask the employee how things were going and what could be improved to help them: ‘We check everything

to make it as smooth as possible to go back to work as a teacher’ (Union official, VBE)

Practical cooperation also focuses on improving conditions for students with additional learning needs. For example, **specialist inclusion consultants** facilitate professional exchange and joint problem-solving. In these cases, **social dialogue acts as a coordinating mechanism**: bringing experts together to ensure schools receive the support required to meet students’ needs and avoid escalation.

5.6. Conclusion

Germany represents an interesting paradox, where strong legal commitments to disability rights coexist with the uneven realisation of inclusive education and employment in practice. The constitutional and legislative frameworks as well as Germany’s ratification of the UN CRPD provide a robust formal basis for participation. However, statistics concerning people with disabilities clearly demonstrate persistent structural inequalities. Within the education system, early tracking and differentiated pathways risk reproducing these inequalities by limiting academic opportunities for learners with disabilities. At the same time, severe teacher shortages, high workloads and limited specialist capacity undermine the everyday enactment of inclusive pedagogy, even where school staff and unions are normatively committed to inclusion. Social dialogue and workplace accommodation mechanisms offer important support for individual employees, but it is unlikely that these alone can offset the consequences of underfunding and broader labour-market segmentation.

CASE STUDY: ROMANIA

6.1. Disability and Special Education in Romania

6.1.1. Historical Legacy of the Medical Model

Contemporary understandings of, and approaches to, disability in Romania have been shaped by **the legacy of the communist era (1948-1989)** (Baciu and Lazar, 2017). During that period, disability was reduced to **an individual medical problem** which rendered people “unable to work” (Pasco et al., 2018). Most persons with disabilities were confined to institutions which were organised according to age, type or degree of disability: children with mild or moderate disabilities were usually educated in special schools, while children and adults with more severe disabilities were placed in residential care institutions (Alexandrescu et al., 2022; Walker, 2011).

Following the collapse of communism in 1989, and in the transformation to a market economy, the Romanian education system experienced considerable upheaval. Nonetheless, the medical model continued to justify segregationist practices. Although students with specific disabilities (e.g. hearing or visual impairments) were offered specialist provision, children with profound and multiple learning disabilities were still considered “uneducable” and excluded from special education (Ainscow and Haile-Georgis, 1999).



6.1.2. Post-Transition Disability Policy Developments

Since 1989, Romania has made **significant progress on disability inclusion and the deinstitutionalisation of children and adults** through key national institutional and legislative reforms. Disability services were also advanced by early support from international organisations (Grung et al., 2020; Jurca et al., 2023) and the increasing alignment of Romanian policy frameworks with those of the United Nations and the European Union (Baciu et al., 2015). On 26 September 2007, Romania adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) (United Nations, 2006), ratifying it in 2010. This marked the start of **a shift to the social model of disability based on human rights**. To support its implementation, the Romanian government developed a series of National Strategies. The objective of the National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2022-2027 “An equitable Romania” is:

Ensuring the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities, based on freedom of decision, in all aspects of life and in an accessible and resilient environment. (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022, p.9)

Despite these developments, Romania has continued to receive criticism from the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights over its implementation of laws and institutional framework (Council of Europe, 2024; Mijatovic, 2019).

6.2. Disability Data in Romania

The number of persons with disabilities in Romania has increased over time (European Commission, 2023b). In 2024, 18.6% of Romanians aged 16 years or over reported some or severe activity limitation⁹ (Eurostat, 2025a). However, official statistics in Romania only report on persons with a **handicap certificate**. Since the assessment process can be complex, and there remains significant **stigma associated with disability disclosure**, persons with mild disabilities often see no incentive in obtaining certification (Alexandrescu et al., 2022; Baciu and Lazar, 2017). Furthermore, different authorities **use different definitions of disability or different terminology** (e.g. despite UN CRPD ratification, “handicap” is used in Romanian legislation for the protection and promotion of disability rights) and collect data for different purposes, meaning most data are not comparable. Overall, this **limits accurate knowledge of the disability situation** and the possibility to design effective policies for persons with disabilities (Baciu and Lazar, 2017).

In the focus group interview, one FSLI official underlined **the need for accurate data** on education personnel with disabilities. Although workplace representation in the pre-university system facilitated data collection, she felt that it ought to be the responsibility of the Ministry.

9 Compared to an EU27 average of 24.5%.

The Ministry of Education collects huge amounts of data, which overloads school directors and teachers in general. But some of the data we consider essential are not collected. And this is another thing that all the trade unions have raised many times in meetings of the social dialogue committee with the Ministry of Education, but also at county level. (Trade union official, FSLI)

6.3. Inclusion in Education

6.3.1. Education Governance and Finance

The Constitution of Romania grants all persons the right to an education, while the new School Education Law (Law 198/2023) and Higher Education Law (Law 199/2023) govern and provide the legal framework for the organisation and functioning of the pre-university school and higher education systems respectively, and regulate the status of teaching, management and auxiliary staff (Eurydice, 2025b). **FSLI were partners in the development of Law 198/2023.**

Several focus group participants considered the new legislation **a step forward for inclusive education**. However, it was noted that many articles had not yet been enforced e.g. the entitlement of every child with special educational needs in mainstream education to a support teacher, multidisciplinary teams and adequate resources in mainstream schools. Indeed, participants maintained that **significant funding was required to enact the legal requirements**.

Public pre-university education, including special education, falls under the

jurisdiction of County School Inspectorates (Inspectoratele Școlare Județene) which ensure local compliance with national education policy and legislation and are responsible for quality assurance. However, the Ministry of National Education is responsible for the overall policy, regulation and financial frameworks, including human resources. Teacher recruitment, allocation and in-service training is therefore coordinated locally but supervised by the Ministry. **Universities and higher education institutions are autonomous** with the right to define their own policies, although the Ministry of Education coordinates their activities (Eurydice, 2025b).

Under the decentralised system, pre-university education is financed by **national (state) and local budgets** which comprise basic funding, complementary funding and additional funding (Eurydice, 2015). According to the first School Education Law under the transition period and subsequent Laws, a minimum of 6% of GDP is supposed to be allocated to education from both budgets. However, one FSLI official claimed that the actual amount had been closer to 3.2%, on average. The lack of investment in education in general, and in special education in particular, meant that **institutions were significantly under-resourced**. Indeed, one Director of a special school had used crowdfunding campaigns and donations to increase her budget.

Public school buildings are the property of local authorities. For one FSLI official, this was a major legislative issue since “the school cannot do anything without the approval of the city hall”.

6.3.2. Education Structure and Access

The Romanian education system is comprised of **public and private education establishments** of various types in: **early childhood education and care** (3 months to 6 years), **primary education** (grades 1-4), **lower secondary education** (grades 5-8), **upper secondary education** (usually 4 years general or vocational and technical education) and **post-secondary non-tertiary education** (1 to 3 years including vocational and technical education) (Eurydice, 2023).

In Romanian legislation and practice, the terms “handicap” and “deficiency” are used in reference to children in need of special care. The concept of “child with special (educational) needs” does not have a formal legal definition and is interpreted according to the context of its use e.g. child protection or education. More recent legislation uses the broader term “disability” (Eurydice, 2023). In the 2022-2027 National Strategy, the general objective on education supports:

The access of children and young persons with disabilities and/or special educational needs, hereinafter referred to as SEN, to quality inclusive education in the community, on equal terms with other children and young people, so that they can reach their full development potential. (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022, pp.9-10).

Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities are entitled to a differentiated form of schooling across all levels of the education system. The three main approaches are: **separated special education** (distinct educational institutions), **partially integrated special education** (separate groups and classes in mainstream education institutions) and **fully integrated special education** (within groups and classes

in mainstream education) (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022).

Separated special education is organised by type (mental, physical, sensorial, language, socio-affective and behavioural, or multiple impairments) and level of disability and development needs. Admission to a special education unit is based on formal evaluation by the commission for child protection in each county council (Eurydice, 2023).

Mainstream school classes may integrate 2 to 3 students with disabilities. For every integrated student, the class size is reduced by 3 students. According to one FSLI official, this policy led to the creation of more classes, **which increased the demand for teachers, specialists and support personnel.** It also had **implications for funding** as schools worked with historical budgetary allocations. Even when integrated into mainstream classes, students often experienced difficulties and needed to spend time in separate classrooms. Focus group participants noted that the provision of partially integrated special education had not really occurred.

According to the National Strategy, 66,272 children (2.6% of all school age children) with special educational needs were enrolled in pre-university education in the 2018-2019 academic year. **Only a small proportion of these were integrated into mainstream education.** The National Strategy underlines the need to reasonably adapt the school environment to the needs of students to provide them with a quality education in mainstream education. However, it acknowledges that “the legislative framework specific to inclusive education is broad, but it lacks a coherent, unitary approach, determined by the lack of financial resources and of human resources with training in the field of special education” (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022, p.7).

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in tertiary education can facilitate their entry into the labour market and an independent

life. However, **persons with disabilities have limited access to higher education in Romania**. Key barriers include: poor quality and insufficient learning in pre-university education and non-mandatory support policy for students (Curaj et al., 2022). In the 2022-2023 European Semester cycle Country Report, the Government indicated that it would invest in the rehabilitation, renovation and development of social infrastructure for persons with disabilities and ensure access to tertiary education (European Commission, 2023b).

6.3.3. Educational Attainment Levels of Persons with Disabilities

The educational attainment of Romanians with disabilities is much lower than that of those without disabilities (Eurostat, 2015b, see Table 4.) Moreover, children or young people with disabilities are more likely to leave education and training early (61.6% of 18- to 24-year-olds with some/ severe activity limitation compared to 16.1% of those with no activity limitation, Eurostat, 2025c) or to be not in employment, education or training (76.1% of 15- to 29-year-olds with some/

severe activity limitation compared to 18.5% of those with no activity limitation, Eurostat, 2025d).

6.3.4. Teachers, Specialists and Education Support Personnel

Special education in Romania has a wide range of **specialist teaching positions**: educator, teaching support/assistant, itinerant teacher, special education teacher, psycho-pedagogue teacher, school psychologist-teacher, social pedagogue-teacher, speech therapist, psychologist, kinetotherapist (Eurydice, 2023). However, according to the National Strategy, **very few teachers in mainstream schools have been trained to work with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities**. There is also a **shortage of education support personnel, and specialist staff are largely concentrated in special schools** (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022). Low expertise in special education impacts teachers’ perceived self-efficacy in inclusive education (Ghergut, 2010, 2020; Gyarmati, 2020; Jurca et al., 2023; Lustrea, 2023).

Table 4. Population in Private Households by Levels of Educational Attainment and Disability (Activity Limitation) in Romania (Eurostat 2025b)

Educational attainment	Less than primary, primary and lower secondary (ISCED levels 0-2)		Upper secondary non-tertiary general education (ISCED levels 3-4)		Upper secondary non-tertiary vocational (ISCED levels 3-4)		Tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-6)	
	Some or severe	None	Some or severe	None	Some or severe	None	Some or severe	None
Germany	38.9%	21.1%	2.7%	4.2%	53.3%	57.2%	5.1%	17.4%
EU27	32.9%	22.5%	9.0%	13.1%	36.6%	30.8%	21.4%	33.6%

In the focus group interview, employer and employee representatives noted that the inclusion agenda had placed **increased pressure on teachers in mainstream schools**. The Director of the Bucharest Municipal Centre for Educational Resources and Assessment claimed that teachers were “not yet ready to have students with special educational needs in classes”. Similarly, FSLI officials stated that their members were struggling with the situation. Both groups highlighted the **limited content on inclusion in teacher education**, which affected teachers’ preparedness and confidence. One FSLI official pointed out that many dedicated personnel had stayed on beyond retirement age to fill the teacher gap. Both he and a higher education representative noted the lack of interest among younger generations.

Education support personnel identified several challenges to their professional careers in mainstream schools: the limited number of tenured positions, the lack of available work space, and the insufficient supply of support personnel to meet the needs of children. However, several participants emphasised **the critical role of well-prepared school leadership** in advancing inclusive practices. One teacher highlighted **the complexity of working within the legal framework** but valued the autonomy granted by her leaders to carry out her work as she saw fit:

I think we’re managing, at least, I like to come to school... And thank God we have two Directors that support us and let us do what we love, namely, to play with children. (Psychopedagogical teacher, special school).

Despite difficulties, teachers and support teachers remained motivated to work with children with special educational needs. Education personnel in the special school were particularly enthusiastic about their participation in ERASMUS+ projects, which

had contributed to their professional and institutional development. One therapist noted:

It’s a challenge for us. The fact is that, without some European projects, we couldn’t have developed ourselves as specialists or as a school....My first European project in 2001, when I went to England to visit a special school. There have been many projects since then. (Therapist, special school).

Teachers also spoke of **collaborations between special schools and mainstream schools** in Bucharest, which allowed for greater flexibility in determining the best provision for students, while one headteacher of a special school mentioned their **partnership with the University of Bucharest**, which meant their pedagogical approach was research-informed.

Finally, one school leader highlighted **the potential of digital accessibility tools and artificial intelligence** (assistive technologies, text-to-speech, adaptive learning platforms). Though not yet widespread, he argued that these could support teaching and learning in the future.

6.3.5. The Challenges to Inclusive Education

Research suggests that **inclusive education in Romania has faced several significant challenges**: a) the rigidity of school systems inherited from the communist era (Ainscow and Haile-Georgis, 1999) b) the inflexibility of curricular and pedagogical approaches (Hathazi and Rosan, 2019), c) the negative attitudes of parents of children without disabilities, and d) an emphasis on individual academic achievement (Ghergut, 2012; Gyarmati, 2020), which means that students

with special educational needs and disabilities can be refused admissions to mainstream education (e.g. UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2015). For those that gain access, their educational journey often concludes at the end of secondary school (Gyramati, 2020).

In the focus group interview, employer and employee representatives noted the wider **systemic and societal barriers** to full inclusion. Several participants reflected on the issue of diagnosis. The Director of a special school favoured a holistic approach, arguing that special education was “where the medical, the psychological and the pedagogical meet”. However, teachers, school leaders, higher education representatives, and union officials highlighted **the difficulty of supporting students whose needs were not identified**. In the pre-university system, **parents could refuse to accept assessments or diagnoses**, which affected teachers’ work:

If you do not know what you are facing, you do not know what to provide. (Union official, FSLI)

One private employer representative underlined the need to have the parents of children with disabilities on board with pedagogical interventions in private mainstream units:

Families are of high importance, and they must be on the same path with the teacher, with the professor, starting from the very first phase... And if you establish a rule or routine at school, it would be better for this routine to continue at home for the sake of the child because, in the end, they need to have a coherent plan of their lives. (Director, private employers association)

Several participants remarked on the difficulties of full inclusion in mainstream public education. Teachers highlighted **the additional financial resources required** and the lack of ‘resource rooms’ to provide differentiated support. By contrast, school principals focused on **teachers’ pedagogical challenges** to include all students, particularly those with severe disabilities. For some employers and teachers, full inclusion was an “ambitious project”, and partial integration was more realistic.

Two school inspectors reflected that **legislation alone was insufficient**; from a societal perspective, Romania was still learning how to support persons with disabilities. As one FSLI official remarked:

Unfortunately, the one who receives these special children is not prepared, because there’s a permanent tendency of rejecting those children still. And it starts from the family, it goes on to the school, because schools don’t teach children about empathy, about being calm and about acceptance. And this sick system needs to be treated. (Union official, FSLI)

6.4. Disability-Inclusive Employment in Education

The transition from education to employment is a key concern in Romania (Birau et al., 2019) and, in the 2022-2027 National Strategy, the general objective on disability employment is:

Ensuring the opportunity for persons with disabilities to implement and develop skills and abilities, as well as the creative and productive potential, in a freely chosen occupation and in an inclusive, accessible, adapted workplace. (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022, p.9).

Nonetheless, the **disability employment gap**¹⁰ in Romania is high: 44.8% in 2024 compared with an EU27 average of 24.0% (Eurostat, 2025e). In 2024, the European Pillar of Social Rights Scoreboard indicated that this was an area “to watch” (European Commission, 2024); by 2025, it was rated a “critical situation” (European Commission, 2025). Low employment can be linked to **low inclusion in mass education** (Bungau et al., 2019; Sandvin and Alexiu, 2020). Persons with disabilities also face a high level of in-work poverty and participate in professional training to a lower extent than those without disabilities (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022).

According to Law 448/2006 on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with a Handicap, Romanian employers with more

than 50 employees must hire disabled persons corresponding to **at least 4% of the total number of employees**. If the quota is not met, the employer has to pay a **contribution to the state budget** for every employee not hired or buy products or services produced or provided by Protected Units employing disabled persons. Most employers prefer to pay the fine or buy the goods (Baciu and Lazar, 2017).

In the focus group interview, one general school inspector noted that there were procedures to ensure that school employees with disabilities had the necessary workplace accommodations. However, participants emphasised **the need for better regulation and extra support** to ensure these needs were met. On the whole, focus group participants provided only limited examples of teachers with disabilities. Most were concerned about the impact of the work on them and of their physical limitations on the students.

One FSLI official believed that graduates from special schools had been better supported in the past. Each student had a social worker to identify jobs and follow up on their progress in the labour market. There were also partnerships with employers.

6.5. Social Dialogue on Inclusive Education

In the focus group interview, one FSLI official noted that the union had started working on inclusive education issues in 2016/2017. **One key concern was teachers’ workload:** increased bureaucracy and the need for pedagogical adaptations had caused **additional stress** for teachers in mainstream education. To support members, **social dialogue was necessary at multiple levels in the system:**

¹⁰ This indicator is the difference between the employment rates of people with no and those with some or severe limitation in their daily activities, aged 20-64 (Eurostat 2025e).

We started having discussions with the Ministry of Education. And we tried to issue certain work methodologies that would make this integration easier. Second of all, we tried to train the teachers to work on their education to better understand the work. And we tried to give them instruments and tools for their class work. And in this respect, we tried to organise many events with European funds, Erasmus especially. And we ended up giving them tools and work instruments, work techniques, and so on. Our trainers were always principals, teachers, and the staff generally. We didn't only work with the teachers and the professors, because unless we work together in a school as a team, we cannot go ahead. This is, in our opinion, a form of social dialogue. (Union official, FSLI)

FSLI has a department dedicated to special education and, in Bucharest, a union with specialist knowledge of this jurisdiction. Consequently, FSLI is “in permanent contact with the system, with the people, with their issues” (FSLI, union official). To improve specialist teacher supply, the federation had proposed the creation of specialist universities, but this idea was rejected.

In vocational education and training, FSLI had managed to acquire accommodations for students with specific learning disabilities and additional studying time or shadow/support teachers for other integrated students. However, it had been less successful on personalised curricula and also wanted multidisciplinary teams in schools to support student integration and wellbeing. Thus, while **social dialogue at county and national levels was consistent**, there were “many things

to be discussed and implemented and fine-tuned” (Union official, FSLI). While the union felt that **the quality of dialogue varied**, one private employer argued that “the door of the Minister is permanently open” to the trade unions. In his view, trade unions were “a voice that is heard”.

Disability inclusion in pre-university employment falls within the framework of health and safety legislation. Collective agreements are negotiated at the national level between the federation and the Ministry and at the county level between the union and the County Inspectorates. Within these agreements, **special sections are devoted to health and safety in the workplace with clear regulations on accommodations** for persons with disabilities. The current collective agreement included the possibility for the purchase of visual aids.

Beyond collective bargaining and the social benefits system, FSLI also has some **internal resources** to support disabled colleagues. However, many issues were dealt with in **commissions established by the collective agreement**. According to one FSLI official, one weakness was that the Ministry of Education had not yet developed a list of occupational diseases and illnesses that could grant rights to education personnel.

No such legislation exists for students and employees in higher education; here, the national framework for discrimination is the primary legal basis for inclusion. As autonomous institutions, **universities were responsible for financing the support and accommodations**.

The National Strategy claims that the trade union sector “is not actively representing the specific rights and ends of workers with disabilities” (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, 2022, p.24). From the perspective of FSLI officials, one main issue was **the low number of teachers with disabilities** in the system and the **lack of discussion on long-**

term strategies for their inclusion. In this regard, one FSLI official gave an example of a young blind teacher:

He comes to school accompanied by his mother and has problems with class management. And when the mother isn't there, because this is life, what will happen to that teacher? And what is the solution we need to propose when we include in the teaching staff people who have such disabilities? It would be very important to have a debate. In the future, we should tackle this topic and identify what colleagues we have with what types of disabilities and to see if there are any express provisions to integrate our colleagues in the teaching core. (Union official, FSLI)

For the FSLI officials, **personal relationships were key to the effectiveness of social dialogue.** There was more shared understanding on some issues than others; therefore, the social partnership could fluctuate at different levels. At the school level, a lot could be achieved through **collaborative projects** with the directors, deputy directors and school board. As one FSLI official remarked: "as long as there is openness, things can advance to the benefit of the employees but also to the benefit of students".

From the FSLI perspective, **inclusive education required radical investment in human and material resources.** Since Ministry of Education funding was divided between the county school inspectorates (salaries) and city hall (other educational expenditure), one official felt that there should be **more social dialogue at city hall.** Without financial support from city hall, schools were forced to

seek funding from other sources. Indeed, low government investment was a major reason behind the 2023 strikes.

6.6. Conclusion

Despite progress on disability rights and legislation, persons with special educational needs and disabilities continue to experience social exclusion in Romanian society. Stigma and discrimination create barriers to, and inequalities in, their full participation in both education and employment. Unreliable data and inconsistencies in terminology limit an accurate understanding of the disability situation. Although the new Law 198/2023 is a positive step for inclusive education, it has not yet been fully implemented. The lack of government investment, alongside shortages of material and human resources, is a significant obstacle to genuine progress. Without the support of school leaders, teachers struggle to work within the legal framework. Significant gaps in initial preparation impact teachers' self-efficacy. Overall, the inclusion agenda places considerable pressure on education personnel, who must provide inclusive pedagogies while also securing funding for professional and school development. Collaboration between mainstream and special schools, both in Romania and internationally, as well as cooperation between employers and employee organisations at various levels of the education system can be beneficial to all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

In this report, we have highlighted the wide range of issues associated with the design and implementation of inclusive education in EU Member States and globally. Although the inclusion agenda is widely supported by national policymakers and school practitioners, much work remains to ensure that every child and young person has access to **a quality, equitable and inclusive education**. This is particularly true for students with special educational needs and disabilities, who are at greatest risk of marginalisation within, or exclusion from, mainstream education and, consequently, face additional barriers in their transition to work and full participation in society.

However, inclusion is complex policy agenda, not least because individuals and groups at different levels of the education system may have **diverse understandings of the phenomenon**. This can lead to varying perspectives on when, how, and to what extent, inclusion in mainstream education should be implemented. In some European contexts, systemic approaches to the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in education and employment are constrained by **the medical model of disability** and **historical and cultural norms** surrounding the 'ideal' student in education and the 'ideal' citizen in work and society. Dismantling these attitudinal barriers and their associated institutional structures, which continue to divide students based on disability, will take time. Some policymakers and practitioners argue that there is a case for, and strong parental support for, specialised provision when it benefits the student. Nonetheless, **the continuance of segregated forms remains at odds with the democratic aims of inclusive education**.

In this report, we highlighted **the principal challenges experienced by education personnel** in the inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities in European mainstream and special education systems. Previous research points to: low education funding, the teacher supply crisis,



shortages of special education personnel (e.g. education psychologists, therapists), specialist practitioners (e.g. in autism, specific learning difficulties) and education support personnel, as well as professional development needs. These issues are shown to significantly affect teacher self-efficacy, the resources they draw on (including artificial intelligence) and their overall working conditions and wellbeing.

Many of these findings are consistent with our own research data. The struggle to provide inclusive education in the context of low education funding, low teacher supply and limited expertise in inclusive and special education were highlighted by education social partners in both Solingen and Bucharest. Education funding, as well as the recruitment and retention of teachers, were also highlighted as policy priorities for the social partners who participated in our survey.

Given the significance of these issues, which not only limit the capacity of education personnel to provide a quality education for all but also have a profound impact on their working lives, **inclusive education should occupy a prominent place in collective bargaining discussions**. While it is not possible to define a universal national, regional or local agenda for inclusive education across all education sectors, such an agenda must begin with the fundamental systemic issues of **education funding, teacher supply and professional development**. This underscores the need for **an extended bargaining agenda** which encompasses professional and wider policy issues. Although education funding and teacher supply are already high on social partners' agendas, professional development continues to receive inadequate attention.

Beyond this, **our research revealed several challenges affecting education personnel**. Policy and parental demands, multi-stakeholder communication, increased bureaucracy and administration, the pressure to adapt pedagogical approaches and the emotional labour associated with supporting students with special educational needs and

disabilities can negatively impact teachers' mental and physical health. As a result, many educators have limited personal resources to support inclusive education. **Inclusive education is therefore a direct concern for teachers' working conditions and industrial negotiations**.

Nonetheless, our online survey revealed that, for many social partners, especially government employers, **inclusive education was not considered a topic for social dialogue**. Furthermore, even where discussions took place, disagreements over the definitions and aims of inclusion could lead to dissatisfaction with outcomes. To ensure that quality social dialogue on inclusive education occurs and is effective, **social partners must secure its legitimacy** as a valid agenda item in negotiation processes and have a common vision. Below, we provide recommendations on how this can be achieved.

First, education social partners need to draw more actively on **the human rights model of disability** to assert the right of every child and young person to a quality and equitable education. As a policy model, it offers a potential roadmap to greater inclusion. The EU and all its Member States have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; United Nations, 2006), a legally binding treaty to which all nation states must align their laws, policies and practices. This includes the right to education (Article 24) and the right to work and employment (Article 27). The UN CRPD provides **a legal framework for the implementation and monitoring of inclusive education** and, more generally, laws on accessibility, disability equality, and anti-discrimination. It underlines that education should be available, accessible and – crucially, for mainstream inclusion – adaptable for all. Furthermore, in emphasising education as a human right, it brings disabled and non-disabled people together under **a shared sense of humanity**.

Second, there needs to be **agreement over the common objectives for social dialogue** on inclusive education. This is challenging because education employers and employees can have different interests, which may lead both groups, in different ways, to prioritise the broader student population or education workforce over the needs of individuals with special educational needs and disabilities. Nonetheless, on the whole, education stakeholders tend to support inclusive education. However, definitions of inclusive education and its aims can vary. This lack of common understanding and vision for inclusive education can prevent social partners from reaching consensus on the necessary actions to advance the inclusion agenda. To develop shared definitions, and ensure greater alignment on policy goals, social partners can combine their use of the UN CRPD with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the Incheon Declaration and the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016) and the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020). Though not legally binding, **these frameworks enable the development of a common language and principles for inclusion**. To ensure greater clarity over meanings and approaches, however, social partners need to learn from others.

Inclusive education cannot be achieved alone. It requires collaboration between education personnel at the school level. Additionally, it requires the vertical integration of partnerships between government (national, regional, local, school) and education (early childhood, primary/secondary, tertiary and adult) levels and the horizontal integration of partnerships between sectors (finance, health, education, social and labour) and actors (professionals, researchers, government, NGOs and the private sector) (UNESCO, 2020). Social dialogue between education social partners can contribute to both vertical and horizontal forms of integration. **Cross-sectoral, multi-level collaborations can enable knowledge**

exchange through shared research and data, thereby informing social dialogue and negotiations.

However, inclusive education is not only an educational issue; it concerns social inclusion more broadly and is central to the advancement of equality, social cohesion and democracy. Education social partners can therefore play a key role in ensuring the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in both education and society. To support this larger social project, **joint actions might involve the development of training, networks, events and campaigns with other civil society organisations** such as parental associations and disabled persons' organisations. Such strategic collaborations could enable a focus on broader issues related to diversity, equality, inclusion and belonging.

Inclusion is a process, not an end product. Schools, institutions and education systems across Europe are at different stages in their inclusion journey, and for some, the process will take longer than others. Maintaining momentum demands continuous commitment from all stakeholders.

Yet, as student populations become increasingly diverse, these schools, institutions and education systems need to adapt accordingly. It is therefore imperative that **governance structures enable leaders and teachers to exercise their professional autonomy** in determining the most effective educational approaches to meet students' social and academic needs.

Finally, inclusive education involves more than the inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities. If schools are to reflect the diversity of the population, **education personnel with disabilities must be an integral part of the inclusion agenda**. This requires the removal of institutional barriers that limit access to, and completion of, initial teacher education, restrict recruitment to professional roles, and reduce opportunities to progress to leadership positions. Equally,

it necessitates an organisational culture shift that enables persons with disabilities to feel secure in disability disclosure and benefit from the accommodations to which they are entitled. **Disability representation in social dialogue** can support this endeavour. It can also demonstrate that, as part of a broader disability inclusion strategy for the education sector, the social partners seek to lead by example.

Inclusive education for all needs extends beyond addressing the needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities. It encompasses the entire student population. To fulfill that ambitious objective, it is essential to meet the professional and educational needs of education personnel and the investment needs of the education system as a whole.

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Appendix A: Research Methodology

The principal research methods of data collection were an **online survey** and **focus group interviews**. This was supported by **desk research** which included quantitative data analysis from Eurostat disability data and a literature review of European and national policy documents.

An **online survey** was distributed to member organisations of ETUCE and EFEE between 22 November 2024 and 28 February 2025. The survey consisted of **74 items** and was divided into two parts. Part one included 14 action items on organisational policy, structures and personnel, disability representation and training, and support for education personnel with disclosed disabilities. Part two included 60 action items on the themes of education funding, education policy, recruitment and retention, professional learning and development, pay and working conditions, and disability equality and anti-discrimination.

Items were designed with **dichotomous branching scales** (Yes/No). A ‘Yes’ response to an action led to follow-up questions on the types of action taken (*Action by my organisation, Action with another organisation, and Action with social partner through social dialogue*). A ‘Yes’ response to Action with a social partner through social dialogue led to a follow-up question on the type of social dialogue (Communication, Consultation, Negotiation or collective bargaining, and Joint projects or initiatives). Respondents could elaborate on their item responses in open text boxes at the end of each thematic section.

The survey received 97 responses. Following data cleaning, 77 responses were retained for analysis: **45 ETUCE member organisations** (all social partners) and **32 EFEE member organisations** (6 social partners and 26 organisations affiliated to social partners) (see Tables 1 and 2).

Data were collected and managed using the REDCap platform (Harris et al., 2019). Data were analysed using SPSS (IBM Corps, 2024) and Microsoft Excel.

Table 5. Respondents Affiliated with the European Trade Union Committee for Education

Organisation Name	Country
ACV CSC	Belgium Flanders
Algemene Onderwijsbond	Netherlands
ASTI	Ireland
Bulgarian Union of Teachers /SEB/	Bulgaria
BUPL	Denmark
CFDT Education Formation Recherche Publiques	France

Organisation Name	Country
ČMOS PŠ	Czech Republic
DAU-SEN, Eastern Mediterranean University	Cyprus, northern part
Education and Science Trade Union Federation from Moldova	Moldova
Eesti Haridustöötajate Liit	Estonia
EGITIM SEN	Turkey
ESFTUG	Georgia
FECCOO	Spain
Federazione UILSCUOLA RUA	Italy
FENPROF	Portugal
FLC CGIL	Italy
ITUPE BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Kennarasamband Islands	Iceland
KTÖS (Cyprus Turkish Teachers' Trade Union)	Cyprus
LCH (Switzerland)	Switzerland
LEETU	Lithuania
Malta Union of Teachers	Malta
National Education Union	UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)
Odborový zväz školstva	Slovakia
OLTEK	Cyprus
PDSZ	Hungary
POED	Cyprus
Republican Committee of the Independent Trade Union of Azerbaijan Education Employees	Azerbaijan
SLFP Enseignement	Belgique francophone
SNCS-FSU	France
SNCS-FSU	France
SNE/CGFP	Luxembourg

Organisation Name	Country
SNES-FSU	France
Sveriges Lärare	Sweden
Syndicate Education Podkrepa	Bulgaria
Teachers Union of Serbia	Serbia
Teachers' Union of Ireland	Ireland
The Trade Union of Education in Finland	Finland
Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine	Ukraine
Trade Union of Education of Montenegro	Montenegro
TUESCRS	Bosnia and Herzegovina
UCU - University and College Union	UK
UESCK/SBASHK	Kosovo
USO	Spain
VBE	Germany

Table 6. Respondents Affiliated with the European Federation of Education Employers

Organisation Name	Country
ANESPO - Portuguese Association of Professional VET Schools	Portugal
Center for support of inclusive education processes - Plovdiv Region	Bulgaria
Collegium Civitas	Poland
Corvinus University of Budapest	Hungary
Daugavpils tehnoloģiju un tūrisma tehnikums	Latvia
De Haagse scholen	Netherlands

Organisation Name	Country
Dobeles Amatniecības un vispārizglītojošā vidusskola	Latvia
Eötvös Loránd University	Hungary
Finnish Education Employers - Sivista	Finland
WEF Bulgaria	Bulgaria
Gimnazija A. G. Matoša, Zabok	Croatia
Gimnazija Celje - Center	Slovenia
Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb, Croatia	Croatia
Go! Onderwijs Van De Vlaamse Gemeenschap	Flemish region Belgium
High school	Slovenia
Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ljubljana	Slovenia
Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen	Belgium Flanders
Komercijalna i trgovačka škola Bjelovar	Croatia
Latgale Industrial Technical School	Latvia
Ministry For Education, Sport, Youth, Research & Innovation	Malta
OPSPoor	Netherlands
Polish Union of Education	Poland
RSMT	Latvia
Semmelweis University, Budapest	Hungary
SIVA	Latvia
Šolski Center Velenje, Elektro in računalniška šola (School Centre Velenje, School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science)	Slovenia
Srednja škola Brač	Croatia
Srednja škola Dugo Selo	Zagreb County
TSS-SMSI Dante Alighieri Pula Pola	Croatia
University of Dunaújváros	Hungary
University of Miskolc	Hungary
Základní škola a Mateřská škola a poskytovatel sociálních služeb, Kaňka o.p.s	Czech Republic

Focus group interviews were conducted during the study visits to: Grundschule Böckerhof, a mainstream primary school in Solingen, Germany, and Școala Gimnazială Specială “SF. NICOLAE”, a special school in Bucharest, Romania. Focus group participants were selected by the social partners in each context.

Participants in the Solingen focus group included representatives from VBE (Verband, Bildung und Erziehung), Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW), the City of Solingen and the Government District of Cologne. **Participants in the Bucharest focus group** included representatives from Federația sindicatelor libere din învățământ (FSLI, Free Trade Union Federation in Education), Federația Sindicatelor din Educație “SPIRU HARET” (FSE SPIRU HARET (Federation of Education Trade Unions), *Federația Națională Sindicală “ALMA MATER”* (FNS ALMA MATER, National Trade Union Federation, representing higher education specifically), Asociația Școlilor Particulare (ASP, Association of Private Schools), the General School Inspectorate of Bucharest, the Bucharest Municipal Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance, and teachers and support teachers from mainstream and special secondary schools.

Interview questions focused on the principal policy documents on inclusive education and disability inclusion, the barriers to the inclusion of students and personnel with disabilities, the professional needs and working conditions of education personnel in mainstream and special schools, the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention and the role of social partners in promoting inclusive education and the inclusion of education personnel with disabilities. Each focus group was approximately **60 minutes in length**. The interview data were analysed thematically to identify the **principal challenges and opportunities** for, and the **effectiveness of social dialogue** on, the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in each context. These data form part of the case studies on Romania and Germany.

Appendix B: Study Visits

Study Visit to Școala Profesionala Specială “SF. NICOLAE, Bucharest

Școala Profesionala Specială “SF. NICOLAE” is a special school in Bucharest which serves children from kindergarten to vocational level. It is **the largest special school in the capital and the second largest in Romania**. Founded in 1969, it was originally established as a complex comprising a special school, dormitory, cafeteria and various annexes. Until 1998, it served as an institution for the education, protection and care of minors with mental disabilities. Today, the building operates solely as a school unit, **providing therapy, stimulation, learning and education to children with moderate and severe disabilities**.

Given the significant functional changes, **the building is inadequate for current provision** and teachers have to be very creative in adapting the facilities to their needs. During our study visit, teachers told us how they had repurposed storage rooms into small classrooms. In one particular classroom, we were shown a series of desks which the teachers themselves had converted from children’s bedframes. **Teachers also buy resources** for their classrooms.

Part of the problem is the fact that public schools **cannot make any substantial changes** to their buildings without permission from Bucharest City Hall (see Romania case study). Equally, there is a **lack of investment in education**, with special education particularly underfunded. This means that school

leaders and teachers have to be extremely resourceful in securing **funding through alternative sources**. One teacher had set up a non-governmental organisation to raise funds for the school. Donations, which mostly came from parents and teachers, were used to purchase resources and assistive technologies for students (e.g. a wheelchair donated to a child for personal use). Teachers also highlighted **major inequities in the special education system**; the Școala Profesionala Specială “SF. NICOLAE” had a Snoezelen multisensory room, but many special schools did not have access to such facilities.

Study Visit to Grundschule Böckerhof, Solingen, Germany

Grundschule Böckerhof is an **inclusive primary school** in Solingen, Germany. In this context, and with the view that diversity enriches both academic and social learning, **all children, regardless of disability status, learn together in mainstream classrooms**. The inclusive model emphasises individualised support and the use of tailored learning materials and varied teaching methods. Overall, it ensures a commitment to equal opportunities and participation for all learners with diverse needs and backgrounds.

Classroom observations revealed several **inclusive measures related to teaching, learning, and behaviour**: visual guides illustrating behavioural expectations, strategies for self-regulation, and noise-reducing headphones for all students. These universal design features contribute to a more inclusive classroom atmosphere. However, inclusive schooling also presents significant challenges. In discussions with the school leader, teachers, and VBE officials, the following issues were highlighted:

Extensive coordination demands: Inclusive education, which differs from state to state, requires significant collaboration among general education teachers, special education professionals and therapeutic specialists. The school lacks its own multi-professional support team and depends on school psychologists and speech specialists provided by the City of Solingen.

Parental acceptance varies: Not all parents recognise or accept that their child has special educational needs. This may be influenced by the limited opportunities to full participation for people with disabilities in Germany (see Germany case study). Teachers invest considerable time preparing both students and parents for special educational needs support.

Inclusive in the broadest sense: The school must support students with visible and cognitive disabilities as well as children with migrant backgrounds who have language acquisition needs. No single approach fits all, which increases the complexity of teaching.

Physical accessibility concerns: The school and municipality have to work systematically to ensure that the school buildings are inclusive, for example, removing stairs or improving wheelchair access. All stakeholders agreed that inclusive schools require additional spaces for small-group work.

Shortage of qualified teachers: This was identified as one of the most critical concerns. Only two teachers have special education qualifications, and both the school leader and VBE officials highlighted the need for more specialists (see Germany case study).

Need for ongoing professional development: Participants expressed a strong desire for enhanced opportunities options to train and upskill current teachers, so that instruction could be more effectively tailored to diverse learner profiles.

Strong motivation despite challenges:

Despite the structural and practical difficulties, teachers, the school leader, and union officials emphasised that their work has a meaningful impact on many children. They remain committed and highly motivated to support all students and continue striving toward a fully inclusive school environment.



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