

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

RESEARCH REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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

RESEARCH REPORT **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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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 students** has become a key concern for national policymakers, international organisations, and wider civil society (e.g. UNESCO, 2021). However, **inclusion in practice is difficult** (Ydesen et al., 2022). Despite widespread adoption of the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practices in Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD; United Nations, 2006), **national and local interpretations of inclusive education vary considerably** (Hardy and Woodcock, 2015). Moreover, the **unequal distribution of resources** often expose the most vulnerable students, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities, to **increased risk of exclusion** (UNESCO, 2020).

Beyond limited progress and the unintended effects, inclusive education places **considerable demands on education personnel**. Amid declining levels of public expenditure on education and a growing teacher recruitment and retention crisis, teachers often **lack the specialised training and expertise** necessary to support the complex needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities. These challenges **undermine the quality of educational provision and negatively affect the self-efficacy, job satisfaction and wellbeing of education personnel** (e.g. OECD, 2025). Although education personnel with disabilities could make a unique contribution to workforce supply and inclusive pedagogies, entrenched structural and attitudinal barriers hinder their professional entry and career progression (Neca et al., 2022).

These systemic and institution-level challenges to inclusive education underline

the need for a strategic, coordinated response by education social partners at both the national and European levels.

However, non-industrial issues, such as those related to policy and professional practice, are not always considered to be within the framework for social dialogue (Stevenson et al., 2018; Stevenson and Milner, 2023). Given its significance for students' future educational and employment opportunities and their participation in democratic societies, it is essential to understand how education social partners address inclusive education, particularly the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities, through the various mechanisms of social dialogue.

In this report, we present the findings of a two-year, European Commission-funded research project titled ***Inclusive Education for All Needs: European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Promoting Inclusion of Persons with Special Needs in Education***. The research was conducted in partnership with the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE). The aim was to examine a) the various interpretations of, and approaches to, inclusive education, b) the professional challenges to inclusive education, and c) social partners' engagement in social dialogue on inclusive education across Europe.

Inclusive education: removing barriers for all

Inclusive education for all

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). Thus, a central aim of the inclusion agenda is to ensure that every student – regardless of their characteristics and background – feels valued, respected and a sense of belonging by **removing barriers to quality mainstream education** (Ainscow, 2005). Nonetheless, despite the commitments made through the Salamanca Statement and the UN CRPD, **students with special educational needs and disabilities remain vulnerable to exclusion** (UNESCO, 2020; Ydesen et al., 2022). This lack of progress can be linked to **historical and cultural norms grounded in the medical model of disability**, which reinforce policies and practices of segregation (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive employment for all

Inclusive education cannot be achieved without the participation of education personnel with disabilities. However, **disability representation within the education workforce remains low**, and education personnel with disabilities face **considerable obstacles in professional preparation and practice** (Neca et al., 2022). This is despite evidence that teachers with disabilities can make **a unique contribution**, both to inclusive pedagogies and to broader understandings of disability equality and anti-discrimination (e.g. Duquette, 2000; Valle et al., 2004). One major

issue is **disability disclosure**; many teachers choose not to disclose for fear of diminished authority, discrimination or exclusion, which limits their entitlement to accommodations (Dvir, 2015; Valle et al., 2004). Teachers standards also tend to promote a **narrow, ableist definition of the ‘competent teacher’** (Wilson et al., 2018).

Social dialogue for inclusion in education

Inclusive employment and labour rights, including policies on equality, diversity and non-discrimination, are central to industrial relations discussions in many contexts; however, non-industrial issues are **not always regarded as being within the scope of social dialogue** (e.g. Stevenson et al., 2018). Nonetheless, inclusive education directly impacts professional roles, workforce structures, terms of employment, working conditions and resource allocation and **requires coordinated commitment to support 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**. Indeed, the various types of social dialogue (joint projects and initiatives, information sharing, consultation and collective bargaining) offer education social partners **opportunities to collaborate across sectors and with other civil society organisations** to ensure coordinated support and integrated provision. Ultimately, **disability representation in social dialogue is crucial** for inclusive policy design and implementation.

Methodology

The research data for this report were generated from **desk research, an online survey and focus group interviews**.

The **desk research** included a review of relevant academic research as well as analyses of national, international and EU statistics and policy documents. The **online survey** was distributed to ETUCE and EFEE member organisations between November 2024 and February 2025. Survey items covered organisational structures and personnel, education personnel representation, education funding, education policy, recruitment and retention, professional learning and development, pay and working conditions, and disability equality and anti-discrimination. The survey received 97 responses from ETUCE and EFEE member organisations.

Focus group interviews with education social partners were conducted during study visits to Grundschule Böckerhof, a mainstream primary school in **Solingen, Germany**, and Școala Gimnazială Specială "SF. NICOLAE", a special school in **Bucharest, Romania**. Interview questions focused on: policies for inclusive education and disability inclusion; barriers to the inclusion of students and education personnel with disabilities; the professional needs and working conditions of education personnel; challenges to teacher recruitment and retention; and the role of social partners in promoting inclusive education and employment.

Promoting the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in education

According to the survey findings, ETUCE and EFEE respondent organisations were **more likely to promote inclusive education than disability-inclusive employment**, both within their own organisations and the wider education sector. Although most organisations represented education personnel with disclosed disabilities, **disability representation in social dialogue remains an area for development**.

In terms of social dialogue, social partners reported the greatest engagement in actions aimed at **increasing government expenditure on education, improving the recruitment and retention of education personnel and improving pay for education personnel at a general level**. Social partners revealed comparatively lower engagement in actions to differentiate education funding and pay and working conditions for inclusive and special education. Fewer than one fifth engaged in actions to **improve the recruitment and retention of education personnel with disabilities**.

In terms of education policy, around two thirds of social partners engaged in actions aimed at **decreasing class sizes or student-to-teacher ratios**. Social partners had lower engagement overall in actions on **professional learning and development** for inclusive education; however, nearly two thirds advocated for more qualified personnel to work with students with special educational needs and disabilities.

Social partner engagement was lowest in actions on **disability equality and anti-discrimination**. Just over half of respondents undertook actions to improve policies related to diversity, equity and inclusion in the education sector, while nearly half engaged in actions to improve employment terms, reduce discrimination and increase awareness of education personnel with disabilities. Engagement was even lower in actions on disability representation in education.

The principal challenges to social dialogue on inclusive education and employment were:

- the **diverse multi-level mechanisms, systems and structures** of education funding
- **low government prioritisation** of education and special education
- the **division of policy responsibilities** between different levels of the education system
- the **lack of shared vision** for inclusive education
- the **low labour market participation of persons with disabilities**
- the **limited legitimacy of inclusive education** as a topic within social dialogue
- **low political interest** in, or **hostility** towards, disability equality and anti-discrimination
- the **limited training of social partners** on disability inclusion
- **limited outcomes** and/or **implementation gaps**

Communication and consultation were the most common types of social dialogue on inclusive education. Higher levels of **collective bargaining** were reported on **education funding and pay and working conditions**. Social partners **engaged least in joint projects and initiatives**.

The focus group interviews in Solingen and Bucharest supported and contextualised the findings of the online survey. Analysis also revealed **several common school and systemic issues**: the uneven implementation of inclusion in practice; inequities in the availability of support, services and resources; the continuance of ability-hierarchical and segregated special education; the complexity of working within inclusion policy frameworks with limited human, financial and material resources; low levels of education funding and targeted funding for inclusive and special education; the need for school leader and teacher autonomy over budgets and practices respectively; the lack of qualified and specialist teachers and the resulting reliance on unqualified or underqualified personnel; the impact of class sizes on levels of student support; the impact of inclusive education on teachers' working conditions and wellbeing; and the social stigma of needs identification, which limited student and employee access to support.

Participants further highlighted the importance of **industrial relations structures and constructive relationships** for the quality and effectiveness of social dialogue.

Conclusion

Despite widespread support for the inclusion agenda, **much work needs to be done** to ensure that every child and young person has access to a quality, inclusive and equitable education. **Students with special educational needs and disabilities face particular barriers**, with consequences for their future education, employment and participation in society.

Inclusion is complex due to **diverse understandings of, and approaches to, its implementation**. In many contexts, the inclusion of persons with special educational needs and disabilities in education and employment is **limited by the medical model of disability and historical and cultural norms**. Institutional and attitudinal barriers that reinforce student segregation will take time to dismantle and continue to impede the development of inclusive, democratic societies.

This research corroborates earlier studies that highlight low education funding, limited teacher supply, shortages of specialist and support personnel, and teachers' professional development needs as key challenges to inclusive education. These issues affect **teachers' sense of self-efficacy, resource utilisation, and wellbeing**. Moreover, policy and parental demands, multi-stakeholder communication, increased bureaucracy and administration, and the emotional labour of supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities **can negatively impact teachers' mental and physical health**. Inclusive education is therefore **a direct concern for teachers' working conditions and industrial negotiations**.

While education funding and teacher supply in general are high on the agenda for social dialogue, professional development receives inadequate attention. Significantly, inclusive education is not always considered a topic

for social dialogue. Moreover, the lack of agreement over definitions and aims can limit dialogue effectiveness and outcomes.

To promote social dialogue on inclusive education, social partners should therefore:

- **Legitimise inclusive education** as a social dialogue agenda item by referencing the human rights model of disability. The UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006) provides a framework for the implementation of inclusive education and laws on accessibility, disability equality, and anti-discrimination. It emphasises that education should be available, accessible and adaptable for all, bringing disabled and non-disabled people together under a shared sense of humanity.
- **Develop shared definitions on inclusive education** to ensure greater alignment on policy goals. Although not legally binding, 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) help advance a common language and principles for inclusion.
- **Support the integration of partnerships** between government (national, regional, local, school) and education (early childhood, primary/secondary, tertiary and adult) levels, sectors (finance, health, education, social and labour) and actors (professionals, researchers, government, non-governmental organisations and the private sector) (UNESCO, 2020). Strengthened cross-sectoral alliances can facilitate knowledge exchange through shared research and data.

- **Engage in joint actions** with social partners and civil society organisations. Training, networks, events and campaigns with parental associations, disabled persons' organisations, charities and non-governmental organisations can enable a focus on broader issues of social inclusion and its contribution to the advancement of democracy.
- **Promote the professional autonomy of education personnel.** As student populations become increasingly diverse, schools, institutions and education systems need to adapt accordingly. It is therefore imperative that governance structures enable leaders and teachers to determine the most effective educational approaches to meet students' needs.
- **Ensure meaningful disability representation in social dialogue.** Disability-inclusive social dialogue can facilitate the dismantling of institutional barriers and foster organisational cultures that support the participation of education personnel with disabilities.



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