

Inclusive Education: Approaches, Scope and Content

- The scope of inclusive education in Nordic countries was referred to as not facing the same obstacles and/or challenges of other regions. For example, the degree of social and economic segregation found in other countries resulting in social exclusion is not a main challenge to be addressed by inclusive education in the Nordic region.
- Nordic countries refer to three stages in the development of equitable educational opportunities: access to education; access to quality education; access to success in education. The conception and challenges of inclusive education in the Nordic region are situated in the third stage: finding ways to continue the development of successful learning in ALL students within a good learning environment and with individual support. Therefore, inclusive education is about everyone being in school and providing good quality education and learning that enables everyone to develop his/her full potential.
- At the same time, with the purpose of sharing a common language, it is necessary to further clarify the concept of inclusive education. Attention should be given to the risk of addressing the concept only at a rhetorical level. The term of inclusive education should be clarified in relation to integration and special needs education. Refining the concept of inclusive education also requires clarifying if there are two separate processes occurring when speaking of inclusive education and individualised education. It is also important to distinguish between individualisation and personalisation; participants identified that in the region, countries are moving towards personalisation which means taking into account the uniqueness and the potential of each child within social context.
- Nordic countries agree that early intervention in the education of a child is an essential component of inclusive education; therefore, refining the concept and practice of early intervention in some countries can be useful as a key step to promote inclusion.
- It is important to increase the awareness about inclusive education throughout the education system, especially at the school level. In parallel, the concept of inclusive education and diversity should also be understood and shared with parents and the community as they may be reticent or afraid to support it. Parents sometimes lose sight of the fact that the school is a reflection of society and they think only about their child instead of doing it always in social context.
- The following groups were identified as deserving more attention in terms of inclusive education: children who are unable to attend school especially because of social-emotional problems regardless of their socio-economic background; ethnic groups (e.g. Roma, adolescent immigrants); students that do not have the skills to continue with education after comprehensive school, especially boys who are dropping out from upper-secondary education. Participants remarked how schools should not only give attention to these groups, but also involve in the education process the local community and family of these students in order to sustain any reform or support within the school. With emphasis, the community's approach and involvement in children's education was referred to as one of the main strengths of Nordic countries.

Inclusive Education: Public Policies

- Participants brought attention to the importance of having policy proposals that address both students' welfare and education through inter- sectoral approaches. At the school level, multi-professional cooperation for the benefit of students should be further developed. In addition, inter-sectoral cooperation and resource people at the level of the municipality who support schools and teachers and parents are also helpful.
- Nordic countries vary in their national and municipal budgetary allocations for special and temporary support provided to children during their school years. Nevertheless, in all Nordic countries municipalities have autonomous power on how to allocate and use such resources. In all countries there is a need to develop more flexible forms of support provided temporarily or continuously to the student through all school years. Such support can vary in form including methodologies of differentiation, flexible study groups, remedial teaching, part-time special needs teaching etc.
- State and governmental policies should also allocate resources to support teachers and schools to address the challenges of inclusive education. For example, there is a need at national and municipal levels, to further invest in multi-professional cooperation and resource centres. In parallel, policies involving teacher education should focus on increasing teachers' skills on how to work with different kind of children and on how to support them individually.
- Laws and relevant policies of inclusive education need to remain flexible to become applicable to local school education contexts.
- There should be unified policy objectives linking university teacher education programs, school curricula and teaching practices throughout all education levels. It is also important to guarantee systematic in-service training for all teachers.
- Dilemma: To what extent do we leave the roadmap proposals to be developed by the schools and/or included in the national guidelines? In the optimal case national policy supports the autonomous solutions of schools and different ways to implement inclusive policies.

Inclusive Education: Systems, Links and Transitions

- Both the school and society need to be ready for inclusion.
- Nordic countries agree in keeping the approach of a broad based, school based curriculum. The idea of inclusion is built into policy making and a national curriculum that is not loaded with instructions on how to do things; rather the curriculum focuses on general competences, and does not detail what to teach.
- The curriculum should not be overloaded with details in addition to the hindrance of time inflexibility.

- The curriculum could be used more freely with more flexible timetables that allow for the development of the full potential of students. It is the case in Finland, especially in the lower grade levels.
- Time is a challenge especially in the upper levels of schooling (i.e. upper secondary).
- There is need to allocate more time to physically exercise as part of the holistic development of a child. Nordic countries are therefore finding ways to involve physical activities throughout the school day.
- Institutional, curricular, structural flexibility is a key factor in positive learning processes, in addition to having flexibility in the use of time, space and resources.
- Flexibility and independence in the way schools work is positively reflected in the students' learning abilities. The school and classroom levels, with positive and supportive teacher-student interaction and active student-student cooperation, are the most important in education.
- Pedagogical leadership: It is important to support municipalities and schools in relation to their provision of pedagogical leadership. Such support should not be a controlling or monitoring one, but rather implying a supportive interaction.
- The Nordic experience shows that the comprehensive school model allows for flexibility; it is this type of school what makes the difference in education processes and outcomes; it is not the curriculum that defines the school model but the school model that allows for flexibility in the curriculum.
- In order to have cohesive transitions in the curriculum across grade levels it is often an advantage to have elementary and secondary schools in one building; smaller building units work well in order to support students individually.
- The same ethos of comprehensive schools needs to be incorporated into upper secondary education; the competencies of all students need to be strengthened to make the transition.
- Cooperation inside and outside the school should be continued and enhanced; especially, among teachers, and with special educators; a multi-professional cooperation, especially in 7-9 grades.
- The relationship between the school and the community should be a close one when it comes, among other, to the design of the school curriculum.
- In Nordic countries, values (e.g. democracy, self-development, learning how to live together, tolerance, participation, self-responsibility) are translated into curriculum and teaching practices. The following aspects are always present at the classroom level – partnership, equality and community.
- Participants agreed on the benefit of a decentralized evaluation of education systems with the objective of assessing and supporting the system as a whole and with less emphasis on specific inspections coming from the national level. For example, in Finland there are no

national inspections of schools and in Iceland educational administrators with a supervisory role regarding schools were abolished in the 1990s providing all compulsory and upper secondary schools the autonomy to adopt methods to self-evaluate their internal communication, external relations, instructional and administrative activities. Denmark introduced quality reports as part of a municipal reform in 2007 with the goal of helping municipalities govern schools.

- Nordic countries have developed well functioning systems for immigrant education but still it is very challenging to address the growing cultural diversity (e.g. language and religion) in the learning processes of students. Proposals to address this diversity could involve special teaching methods and support activities that consider the different learning and cultural differences in students; bilingual education; education in mother tongue (e.g. Finland, Norway and Sweden)

Inclusive Education: Learners and Teachers

- The teaching profession is highly valued in Nordic countries and their societies.
- An education system based on the trust given to the teacher is an essential aspect (only Sweden has a national inspection system to monitor schools)
- In Nordic countries, the relationship between teachers and students is not a formal hierarchical one. The relationship is characterised by warm, friendly and respectful interaction between teachers and students.
- Emphasis should be given to an ongoing cooperation between parents and teachers.
- Attention must be given to the different salaries and training backgrounds between classroom and subject teachers as this may encourage divisions between them hindering collaboration at the school level.
- Teachers need continued support to meet the various needs of students. A lack of qualified teachers and special needs class teachers was identified in certain countries (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, it varies as well by geographical area (urban, rural). A good knowledge base and skills about how to teach children with different needs is important to develop in teacher education programs; in this way, teachers will be able to rely on their own competencies in an inclusive way.
- In response to the question of how to increase and support the knowledge and skills of teachers in inclusive education the following was discussed: The role of assistant teachers was explored. Assistant teachers do not provide a continuous support; they vary in their teaching quality. Also, assistance in the classroom should not be excluding, counter-productive, or stigmatizing. Thus, more attention should be given to whom and how the assistance is organized and provided. Provision of assistance is related also to how the whole community works. Assistance should be provided as a whole, in the context of a community understanding that everyone receives help. In Finland, the part-time special needs education is a good example of successful and no-stigmatising form of support.

- Team teaching could be useful as a support for inclusive education yet without excluding the possibility of having the support of assistance. Compared to the past, teachers are now more willing to teach in teams.
- Implement more creative ways of enhancing the learning environments in the classroom, for both academic and social purposes (e.g. peer tutoring, assistance and team teaching). The question remained: Should this be a school-based initiative or to what point should this be a homogenous measure applied to all schools?
- The continuation of education after compulsory education is a common challenge. There are still too many drop outs at the upper secondary level even though the drop-out figures are quite low in international comparison. Support systems are needed to follow up drop outs.
- Participants proposed to address drop outs at the upper secondary level by improving student guidance and counselling activities and by improving students' competencies as they move from comprehensive school to upper secondary; also learning barriers such as family problems must be addressed.
- Nordic countries encourage and develop student participation as a key element of an inclusive society. There is a high development of student participation beyond student councils; it is embedded in all the educational school processes.
- Creative teaching methods that aim to meet and develop the different needs of students were suggested. For example, participants discussed "differentiation" similarly understood as "personalisation" or "individualisation" as a pedagogical approach which involves using with students different methods, by giving different tasks, and using different kind of materials. This kind of pedagogy results in a differentiated pedagogy used in mixed ability groups in which all students benefit from it. If a teacher is able to "differentiate" or "personalise" or "individualise" learning situations from the very beginning, it will result in lowering numbers in special education.
- Supporting students' all-round personal development is a key aspect of an inclusive curriculum.
- The role of individual study plans was widely discussed as part of the roadmap. Individual study plans were positively considered in the region as a good way to approach the variety in students' needs and interests. This involves a negotiation with the student and parents about methods, goals and commitments. It helps the student to become aware of his/her own learning process. For example, Denmark and Finland have introduced individual study plans to evaluate the student and to communicate with parents.
- Setting up individual study plans should not suppose lowering what is expected from each student or hinder the possibility of following their learning process. Individual study plans should be applicable to include students with special needs as well as gifted ones; individual study plans would be able to address the variance in students' learning needs. Individual study plans could also be supported by pedagogical methodologies involving student group work.
- Student assessment should be based on the individual growth rate. Nordic countries could be more creative on how to measure the progress of learning. How to evaluate individual

progress, in a way that is supportive during schooling and that at the end of compulsory education provides some criteria that helps teachers see the individual achievement compared to the national level of achievement. The National Core Curriculum 2004 in Finland presents this kind of evaluation system.

- It is important to give feedback to students, teachers, parents, in order to better understand different strategies of learning during children's schooling. At the same time, teachers' education must incorporate that approach.
- Attention should be given to help students in their transitions between education levels, involving parents in the process.
- Instead of increasing and using a diagnostic approach to address the differences among children, evaluation of pedagogies and learning environments should be useful to seek extra support and additional funding to attend to the different learning needs of children.
- To the date, about 25% of students in Finland are defined as needing some kind of additional support during their compulsory education; the numbers are lower in other Nordic countries. Most of this support is given by students own class teacher or subject teacher and by special needs teacher (so called part time special needs education that is usually given simultaneously during the regular lesson). Support is organised in strong collaboration and interaction with parents.