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**“Teacher development for inclusive education”**

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The present policy brief synthesises ETF knowledge and experience in the area of inclusive education and training with a focus on teacher development for inclusive education. Experience in this field has been gained primarily in the Western Balkan countries but the knowledge contained in this policy brief may well inform the work of policy-makers and practitioners also in other ETF partner countries or in other transition countries.

The policy brief argues in favour of a broader understanding of the concept of inclusive education, of non-segregating people from ethnic communities, of a higher focus on preparing teachers for their roles before and during their careers and a partnership between actors within and outside school. The role of the initial and continuous teacher education is considered crucial in promoting inclusive communities and supporting changes in content, approaches, structures and strategies. The policy brief identifies the types of teacher competences needed for inclusive education in situations of social and cultural diversity. It analyses key issues and challenges regarding pre-service and in-service teacher preparation for inclusive education and makes suggestions for respective changes.

**Introduction**

The policy brief is based on key findings from a regional report (ETF, 2011) that has been produced as part of ETF’s Social Inclusion through Education and Training project carried out in Western Balkans between 2008 and 2011.The regional report in turn draws together and analyses research findings from studies in seven countries, namely, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-1), Montenegro and Serbia, which are strongly influenced by the aspirations of joining the European Union (EU). In this perspective, increased attention by policy makers, planners and teacher educators to all learners in these contexts of diversity is considered essential for inclusive education, social inclusion and cohesion. The preparation of teachers for working in real-life contexts of social and cultural diversity is considered fundamental to inclusive education. Teacher preparation in the region has tended to assume homogenous school populations, despite a troubled history and great social and cultural diversity. A number of changes are now being introduced in legislation and educational policies and practices with the intention of ensuring equity and inclusion in relation to the diverse cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, abilities and the religious identities of students.

**Definition**

‘Inclusive education’ is broadly conceptualised as the process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering and restructuring curricular organisation and provision and by allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity. This process enables schools to increase their capacity to accept all the pupils from the local community who wish to attend and, in so doing, reduces all forms of exclusion and degradation of students on the basis of disability, ethnicity or anything that could render the school life of some children unnecessarily difficult (Sebba and Sachdev, 1997; Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Florian and Rouse, 2009).

This set an overall vision of making universal the access to education for all children, youth and adults, and promoting equity. It implies that schools with an inclusive orientation are most effective in combating discriminatory attitudes, engaging and welcoming the community around thus helping in building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Inclusive education is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs through participation in learning, cultures, communication, and at the same time reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It is an on going process which involves changes in content, approaches, structures and strategies.

**Rationale**

Why is it so important to address the issue of social inclusion through education and training? Populations in Western Balkan countries with many languages, ethnic communities and religions, as also highlighted in recent conflicts, are complex and diverse. This has had an impact on education and training provision; in some cases it has even led to polarisation:

* between a small but relatively wealthy minority and large numbers of poor people;
* between people with ability, talent and opportunities and people with disabilities and other disadvantages;
* between sophisticated urban societies and isolated underdeveloped rural hamlets and
* between settled communities and populations that are unsettled or transient.

Polarisation might have come about through choice and tradition or as a consequence of internal migration and post-conflict displacement or return.

Education and training must be equitable for all people and should take into account their socioeconomic and political contexts. Increasing social inclusion and protecting minority rights in the region will not least be essential to progress towards European Union accession.

**Key issues and challenges**

***Narrow concept***

An overarching meta-issue that permeates all the other issues is the fact that countries still use an overly limited and narrow concept of inclusive education. It is mostly very narrowly related to bringing children and young people with special education need — in particular those with disabilities and, less frequently, Roma — into education. This is usually done through integrating them in mainstream schools, but sometimes special classes. There is, furthermore, a tendency to omit reference to the prevalent cultural, linguistic, geographic and socioeconomic reasons for educational disadvantage and exclusion. This limited concept of inclusive education represents a major barrier to constructive planning and progress towards social and educational inclusion.

***Governance and policies***

A second issue refers to governance frameworks, policies and long-established practices in the education systems that impact directly and indirectly on the inclusiveness of schools. Many children and young people are educationally disenfranchised, which includes non-enrolled pupils, irregular attendees, dropouts and early leavers. However, responsibilities and developments in the devolution of educational responsibilities to local authorities are not always clear. In addition, there is a lack of recognition of the potential of vocational schools for building educational and social inclusion in the Western Balkan countries.

The prevalence of teachers who work in isolation with their students and in their classrooms highlights the lack of in-school collaboration and the insufficient recognition and development of the potential of key school staff, including principals, psychologists, speech therapists, pedagogues and practical assistants. This is further echoed by evidence of poor school-home relationships and a lack of partnership in the education of children and young people. Some initiatives and constructive steps in terms of greater educational and social inclusion and the building of schools as agents for change were noted. However, they fall far short of being sufficient and, even in their limited range of action, are not always effective, indicating weak support for schools in this regard. As a result, there are great discrepancies and lengthy delays between declared inclusion intentions, as recorded in legislation and official guidelines, and actual practice.

***Teacher profession and employment***

A third issue focuses on the teaching profession and teacher employment, with special reference to working in contexts of social and cultural diversity. Teacher status and conditions of employment impact on quality professional recruitment. Teaching staff are not generally representative of population diversity and the recruitment of minority student teachers is not generally prioritised. This deprives students of positive role models and culturally sensitive approaches to education, especially given the low or non-existent awareness among teachers of intercultural education and bi- or multilingualism.

It is also widely accepted that teachers do not have a sufficiently strong grasp of what their competences should be and that they often lack the necessary confidence to put them into practice. Teacher classroom practices are rarely observed by school managers or inspectors. According to parents and the teachers themselves, teaching and classroom practices are often inflexible and non-inclusive. There is a great deal of doubt regarding teacher capacities and willingness to foster social cohesion and inclusion in their students. Finally, there is a dearth of structured opportunities for developing competences for inclusive education.

***Teacher development***

The unconnected pre- and in-service professional training systems for all levels of school staff present a fourth challenge to systemic change. The limited concept of inclusive education, if the issue is addressed at all, results in programmes that instruct student teachers in how to remedy deficits rather than on more generic, holistic and constructivist educational approaches. Quality assurance systems in education are not fully effective and lack formative links, both in general and in relation to inclusive education. Although teachers would welcome currently lacking competence-based teacher standards, their concept of competences is too narrow to achieve inclusive education through the application of such standards. Quality assurance and accreditation systems for pre- and in-service teacher development providers and programmes are insufficiently developed. Finally, there is a lack of systemic opportunities for teaching practice in teacher development.

Challenges facing pre-service teacher education may have a knock-on impact on subsequent continuing professional development. Pre-service teacher development is subject- and content-focused rather than aimed at building systemic holistic competences for inclusive education. Faculty-based teacher trainers who largely work in pre-service teacher development are severely challenged as developers of teachers for contexts of social and cultural diversity in terms of relevant knowledge of inclusive education and of attitudes and motivation towards inclusive education. Furthermore, their own teaching approaches and ways of working tend to be out-of-date, non-inclusive and distant from students. There is insufficient and inadequate preparation of VET teachers due to the absence of an effective, coherent and collaborative system of teacher preparation.

Continuing professional development, which includes specific in-service teacher education (called INSET), is inadequate, poorly coordinated and rarely properly evaluated. Moreover, participation is not linked to conditions of service. More courses on inclusive approaches would be welcomed by teachers but learning is often not followed up adequately or implemented effectively. International donors and national and international NGOs have led continuing professional development in inclusive education. However, this resulted in some countries becoming overly dependent on these bodies and also in patchwork provision, some of which is excellent, yet at risk because of transient involvement of donors and international NGOs.

In conclusion, existing policies and practices in the region are generally not well oriented towards the development of teachers for inclusive education in the broad sense, nor do they enable teachers to contribute as much as they could to social inclusion and social cohesion in the Western Balkan countries. This single all-encompassing message should be of deep concern to anyone involved in the current education and future lives of children and young people, especially those at risk of social and educational exclusion or disadvantage. Examples of good practice among professionals, faculties and schools do exist and have been illustrated in the regional report (ETF, 2011) – but the overall message still holds true.

**Recommendations**

While there seem to be many good intentions and much activity in terms of targeting inclusive education, the underlying restricted and narrow understanding of the concept of inclusive education in the region likely serves to maintain counter-inclusive practices and may even reinforce practices leading to exclusion and/or negative stereotyping of some students and groups of students. While the Western Balkan countries have generally adopted policies and regulations granting minorities’ entitlement to culturally and linguistically sensitive education, these must not contribute to the segregated education of students from different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as is currently the case in some countries.

On the other hand, although teacher education has expanded and been academically elevated as its importance is increasingly recognised, there is an issue of providing more adequate opportunities for teacher development either in the initial training and novice teacher stages or throughout a teacher’s career. While there is a widespread belief in the importance of values and of a developmental moral role for teachers in the region, a higher focus needs to be put on enabling teachers to acquire relevant competences for this role.

Based on these general findings and reflections, below follow a number of recommendations aimed at different groups of stakeholders:

## Recommendations for policy makers

**Towards a broader understanding of the concept of inclusive education**

National and regional policy debates need to revisit the concept of inclusive education and to try to see it as a mainstream general policy and practice in education, rather than just a specific intervention addressing one or more particular disadvantaged groups. Hence, inclusive education needs to become a process by means of which schools attempt to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering and restructuring curriculum organisation and provision and by allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity. The shift to this broader sense of the term brings concrete implications for both the design of the learning process and the system for development of teachers.

**Teachers’ competences, standards and quality assurance**

Teacher competences for inclusive education tend to be generic skills, rather than specialist knowledge and abilities. Their generic nature needs to be taken into account and embedded into the national, local, and institutional quality assurance mechanisms in order to ensure an all-pervasive approach to developing all teachers.

Standards should be agreed among all stakeholders, including policy makers, pre-service and in-service teacher educators, teachers and school principals. It is important that teachers and other education professionals are involved in the formulation of policies and are consulted when new laws are being drafted.

Quality assurance systems for continuing professional development (CPD) should specify that inclusive approaches underpin all forms of CPD, on the presumption that all schools have students who will, for many varied reasons, experience difficulties in learning for some or all their school career. Inclusive education should be seen as quality education.

**Schools and teachers**

Establishing systems of incentives and rewards for innovative schools and teachers could inspire them to change and develop practices towards greater inclusion. Such schemes could motivate greater in-school collaboration and whole-school development. Policy makers at the national, local and school levels should seek to provide opportunities for reflection, discussion, dialogue and peer-support systems within teaching contract hours, as well as to ensure a realistic level of funding for teacher CPD.

**Non-governmental sector and external development partners**

The expertise, experience and ethical commitment to inclusive education of local and international NGO staff and the trainers that they have developed is invaluable and should not be lost to a country when an NGO leaves the region. International and national NGO initiatives promoting inclusive educational policies and practices could be much more effective if their activities within a country were collaborative and coordinated.

## Recommendations for teacher educators

**Pre-service teacher education**

Promoting teacher education as a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, learning outcomes-based study area requires working together, across institutions, the country, the region and Europe, to move teacher education up the agenda. Collaboration between subject faculties and teacher education faculties is highly relevant and needed. Skills for inclusive education should to be promoted as a cross-curricular activity. There is also a need to create opportunities for teacher reflection on sensitive issues of reconciliation, values and identities.

Building links with schools could help teacher education institutions and their staff focus on how they can respond to ongoing changes in teacher roles and responsibilities and would also enhance opportunities for mutual learning between teacher education institutions and school professionals. Teacher education institutions could attract practising teachers and other education professionals to their study programmes by providing flexible arrangements for study.

Encouraging student teachers and teachers to be more mobile would help them experience other cultures, school organisations and teaching and learning methods. The EU Tempus programmes could be used to this end, as well as inter-school exchanges between special and mainstream schools and between schools using different languages and short-term secondments of outstanding and inclusive teachers to work as assistants in teacher education institutions.

Teacher education institutions could provide support to access by student teachers from minority backgrounds, e.g. through intensive access courses, grants, etc. The cognitive advantages of bilingual learning should be promoted in teacher education, in schools and with parents. All teachers require basic skills for working with bilingual learners.

VET teachers need opportunities to develop competences for inclusive education and teaching before they enter the teaching profession, e.g. as part of specialised pre-service teacher education or through the provision of additional training for VET teacher graduates from other programmes.

**In-service teacher education and CPD teacher educators/trainers**

Inclusive approaches should be embedded in all forms of CPD and in-service teacher education, on the presumption that all schools have students who, for a variety of reasons, will experience some difficulties in learning at some time throughout their school career.

CPD could be organised in a variety of forms, some of which should be whole-school-based and communities of learning, which could also involve others in the wider school community including specialist staff (psychologists, pedagogues and speech therapists), teaching assistants, parents and other relevant professionals from social, and youth and health services. Schools might also collaborate locally in CPD, in-service teacher education, exchange visits and developmental projects with other schools, including special schools and schools at different age levels.

## Recommendations for school staff and expert advisors

**School principals**

School principals need to be supported in their specific development needs for leadership and management. A range of possible approaches to training and exchange, mentoring systems, work shadowing, distance learning, in-service teacher education and experiential learning could be combined.

**Teachers and expert advisors**

School-based expert advisors (pedagogues, psychologists and speech therapists) should be able to access much of the in-service teacher education and CPD opportunities open to teachers and participate in whole-school development.

There needs to be greater awareness among teachers and expert advisors of the role of VET and opportunities available to diverse learners in VET. At the same time, assumptions should not be made that VET is a natural choice for students from backgrounds of disadvantage. Their opportunities to enter their own choice of secondary school should be optimised in terms of learning and encouragement.

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1. Under UNSCR 1244/1999 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)