

InclEduw 4AllNeeds

Study Visit Solingen
5 September 2024

REPORT

EFEE





“European Sectoral Social Partners in Education promoting inclusion of persons with special needs in education”

(Project *InclEdu4AllNeeds*, number 101145637)



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Introduction

The study visit took place on 5 September in Solingen, Germany, as part of the [social dialogue project InclEdu4AllNeeds](#) - ["European Sectoral Social Partners in Education promoting inclusion of persons with special needs in education" \(2024 - 2026\)](#).

The project led by ETUCE and EFEE with the co-funding of the European Commission, constitutes a key action for the implementation of the [Work Programme 2024-2026](#) of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education (ESSDE). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and linked to it the shift to online teaching, as well as the war in Ukraine and linked to it the migration and energy crisis in Europe, inflicted severe consequences especially for those students who are already disadvantaged. Following the commitment of European Social Partners in Education to enhancing the provision of the quality and inclusive education which realizes the full potential of every student and pays special attention to learners at risk of exclusion and underachievement, the project aims to identify and promote successful joint approaches of social partners in ensuring the full inclusion of persons with special needs in education systems and education policies, as well as to evaluate the current policies and practices, resulting in a concrete set of proposals and recommendations for national member organisations, employers in education, education authorities and governments.

Training workshop objectives:

- To evaluate the existing legislation, special programmes and measures undertaken at national, regional, local or institutional level as regards to the inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies, as well as assess the impact of the EU policies on inclusion on the national educational and employment policies, identifying challenges (e.g. special needs teachers' shortage) and potential solutions;
- To identify and promote the joint approaches, practices and strategies of social partners in education to ensure the full inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education and employment policies,
- To address the relevant professional needs of school leaders, teachers and other education personnel, challenges linked to working and learning conditions (including digital and sustainable education), initial and continuous professional development, recruitment and retention, and other areas;
- To support education trade unions and education employer organisations across Europe to become more pro-active in addressing the issue of the inclusion of persons with special needs in education systems with an intersectional approach and against the backdrop of the consequences of COVID-19, in their national social dialogue structures and within the European Semester consultation practices at national level;
- To update knowledge and peer learning on this topic in the ESSDE Committee;
- To draft concrete guidelines on how to promote effective inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level.

Project activities include:

- An **online survey** among ETUCE and EFEE national member organisations;
- **Focus groups and school visits** organised in Solingen (Germany) and Bucharest (Romania) with the participation of local social partners in education. The visits consist of school visits, interview and filming in order to look at best joint practices of social partners in the inclusion of persons with special needs in education, which are currently being implemented;
- **Two training seminars:** in Paris (France) and Lisbon (Portugal) with participants from other ETUCE and EFEE member organisations. The sessions will be used to present and discuss the research and country visits outcomes, build the knowledge and capacity of social partners on the topic, exchange good practices, and discuss the draft guidelines on how to promote effective inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level.
- **Final conference** in Chisinau, Moldova, where practical guidelines on how to promote effective inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies through joint social partner initiatives at national, regional and local level, will be drafted;
- **Filming a series of short videos** on the current situation persons with special needs in education systems in several European countries, as well as on the role of education social partners in addressing the issue.



Study visit to Solingen

The study visit to Solingen included the visit to the Grundschule Böckerhof school and focus group discussion among local social partners in education.

The aims of the study visit were the following:

- To complement the desk research and online survey with a more **in-depth knowledge and qualitative data on the existing legislation, special programmes and measures undertaken at national, regional, local or institutional level** as regards the inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education policies, with an intersectional approach and against the backdrop of the consequences of the COVID-19;
- To collect the **views of education personnel and institutional leadership, as well as social partners in education** on the state-of-art of inclusion of persons with special needs in the German education systems;
- To address the **relevant professional needs of school leaders, teachers and other education personnel, challenges linked to working and learning conditions** (including digital and sustainable education), **initial and continuous professional development, recruitment and retention, and other areas**, and
- To identify the **joint approaches, practices and strategies of social partners in education** to ensuring the full inclusion of persons with special needs in the education system and education and employment policies.

This project activity included the participation of:

- Project coordinators from ETUCE and EFEE secretariats;
- The subcontracted research experts from the Aalborg University;
- The subcontracted video-makers from Les Films de l'Europe;
- German Social Partners in Education, including:
 - Representatives of the Verband Bildung und Erziehung, VBE, for the trade union side;
 - School office Düren, representative for district government of Cologne;
 - Principal of the Grundschule Böckerhof school;
 - Representative of the City of Solingen office (Specialist office for people with disabilities in working life/welfare);
 - Special needs teachers.

1. Visit to the Grundschule Böckerhof school

During the study visit, project coordinators from ETUCE and EFEE secretariats together with project researchers visited an inclusive primary school, Grundschule Böckerhof, engaging with teachers including special needs teachers, the school leader, and trade union representatives to gather valuable insights on the experience of organising an inclusive school where students with special needs are fully included in the mainstream education. ETUCE Coordinator and researchers witnessed a lesson in the class with two special needs students where students were preparing their projects for the upcoming class trip to another German city. The teaching included both group and individual work, and researchers could discuss the details with the main class teacher and support teacher for special needs. The filming team has also conducted the recording of the lesson and three interviews: with the school principal, VBE representative, and the school teacher.

After the lesson, ETUCE and EFEE coordinators and researchers had an opportunity to discuss the inclusive education in the Grundschule Böckerhof school in the context of German education system overall with the school principal and the school teacher, joined by VBE representatives and special needs teachers from other schools.

The school does not have a multi-professional team to support students and teachers with special needs but can contact the school psychologists and speech experts in the City of Solingen office when needed. However, that means only occasional work and not on regular basis.



The school principal shared insights about the evolution of the school from a regular to an inclusive school over the past nine years. She highlighted in particular:

- That inclusion is broader than catering to children with special needs; it also involves integrating children from diverse backgrounds, such as non-German speakers. The challenges vary for different students, including those with low IQ, intellectual disabilities, and social difficulties.
- The transition to an inclusive school was hampered by a lack of resources, including funding, equipment, and trained education personnel. The school management and trade union representatives pointed out at the existing lack of resources both in terms of school infrastructure (e.g. extra classrooms for students with special needs and/or specialists to work with them additionally to the mainstream lessons, hearing aids, adaptation of the school buildings, technical equipment, etc.) and special needs teachers (there are only 2 special needs teachers for 13 classes).
- Recruiting teachers qualified to handle special needs students is a major hurdle. Although there are 10% officially recognized special needs students, the actual number is higher as many remain unrecognized due to bureaucracy and reluctance from parents.
- There is limited autonomy of the school in decision-making, with low parental involvement in the process.
- The pandemic exacerbated challenges, particularly for autistic students. Digital technology was introduced but was limited in availability, and there was no widespread use of AI or dedicated IT specialists in German schools.

The discussion also focused in particular on the issues of support and training for education personnel regarding the inclusion of students with special needs. The school is using the training foundation for continuous professional development on this topic and trainings with inclusion experts. Speakers highlighted that teachers lack sufficient training to deal with emotional and behavioural challenges, especially with special needs students. While there are union representatives and a small support system in place, it remains insufficient. Furthermore, special needs teachers are trained to deal with one specific type of disability while they have to address various types at their workplaces. Due to the teacher shortage in the country, special needs teachers often have to teach other subjects making them unavailable to provide the regular support to students with special needs.

The school principal reported that there are a few teachers with special needs among the school staff, however they are reluctant to announce their needs and disabilities, not only to other education personnel but also to parents.

Despite the various challenges, school staff highlighted the crucial importance of including students with special needs in the mainstream education for changing the society's mindset about special needs. One of the school teachers shared a success story of an autistic student who faced severe difficulties but is now preparing to attend university, a testimony to the school's efforts.

2. Focus group discussion

A significant part of the study visit included a focus group discussion among German social partners in education, collecting the views of education personnel and institutional leadership, as well as social partners in education on the state-of-art of inclusion of persons with special needs in the German education systems. Insightful discussions among German education trade union representatives, school leaders and local education authorities on the relevant professional needs and working conditions of education personnel regarding the inclusion of persons with special needs in education, and on the role of social partners in education, was moderated by project researchers from Aalborg University. The conversation evolved around such issues as resource allocation, teacher training, legal frameworks, and the practical realities of implementing inclusive education.

Inclusion Policies and Legal Frameworks:

- **Federal and State Laws:** Each federal state (*Bundesland*) in Germany develops its own laws regarding the inclusion of students with special needs. A significant challenge is the bureaucratic process that often delays support. For instance, parents and schools initiate the diagnosis procedure, but the authorities ultimately decide if the child qualifies for special needs services. This approval process can take up to 2-3 years and requires detailed documentation procedure.
- **Types of inclusion:** There are three types of schools in Germany regarding the inclusion of students with special needs:
 - Schools with the joint instructions for all students regardless of disability;
 - Schools where students with special needs are integrated into regular classes, but often receive separate instruction;
 - Special schools in cooperation with regular schools.
- **Patchwork of Policies:** German social partners in education expressed a desire for coherent inclusion policies across education ministries in different *Bundesländer*. Currently, inclusion standards vary by the *Bundesland* and school, leading to inconsistencies in support and resource allocation.
- **Inclusion in practice:** Focus group participants highlighted the importance of supporting all children, both in theory and practice, but cited the lack of sufficient resources and teachers as ongoing obstacles.
- **Social dialogue on inclusion of persons with special needs in education:** While there are frameworks in place for inclusion, such as integration discussions and competence centres, clearer guidelines and more robust social dialogue are needed to ensure effective implementation.

Resource Shortages:

- **Teacher shortage:** A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the shortage of qualified teachers, special needs teachers and specialised personnel, such as social workers and psychologists. Despite efforts to reduce class sizes and increase support, these shortages persist.

- **Multi-professional Teams:** In 2017, the German education system sought to bring additional support, into schools, by employing different professions in addition to the teachers. In a multiprofessional team there can be social educators, psychologists, occupational therapists, etc. Schools are allowed to choose, which profession they need at their school. However, it was noted that financial constraints made this initiative difficult to scale up effectively.
- **Social and Mental Health Challenges:** Special needs teachers face significant challenges due to mental health issues arising from heavy workloads. Support systems are in place, such as discussions with HR representatives, but more needs to be done at both the local and state levels.
- **Teacher Support and Compensation:** German education trade unions advocate for better recognition and higher pay for special needs teachers, who are often underqualified and underappreciated. There are ongoing discussions about improving teacher training and preparation time, which is currently not included in their compensation.

Challenges in Teacher Training and Attitudes:

- **Lack of Special Needs Training:** Special education is not adequately addressed in regular teacher training programs, even though there has been a federal legislation on inclusion for over a decade. Many teachers feel unprepared to work with special needs children, which affects the quality of inclusive mainstream education.
- **Teacher Attitudes:** Some teachers feel that working with special needs students is beyond their scope of responsibility, which adds to the existing strain on special needs teachers.
- **Administrative Burdens:** The red tape in the education sector has worsened in the past years, and all teachers face a lot of administrative burdens in their work reducing their time for direct interaction with students. Teachers of special needs students face even more administrative duties, including creating individual learning plans and reports.
- **Parental Reluctance:** Many parents are hesitant to label their children as having special needs, which complicates the process of integrating children into appropriate support systems. Parents' rights often supersede the system's need for accurate information about a child's needs.



Workplace Conditions and Teacher Well-being:

- Education personnel with special needs:** There are difficulties with engaging teachers and other education personnel who have special needs themselves, as they are often hesitant to ask for support. However, both unions and employers are trying to do as much as possible to support education personnel with special needs. For example, there are competence centres (*Ger. Fachstelle*) for everyone who works in Solingen, and they provide support to teachers with special needs. For example, hearing or vision impaired education personnel receive adapted workplaces and extra social allowance, their taxi to workplace is covered by the employer. If they cannot work any longer, they receive an extra insurance.
- Stress and Burnout:** Working conditions for teachers are becoming increasingly difficult. There is growing concern about the mental health of teachers, particularly those working with special needs students. Efforts are being made to reduce stress and provide better support, but the lack of personnel makes it hard to alleviate the pressures.
- Social Dialogue:** The unions, particularly VBE, prioritize the well-being of teachers, and they provide support for teachers injured on the job or those struggling with their workload. However, many of the proposals from unions remain unimplemented, particularly because discussions often take place in the afternoon when teachers are tired.

Need for Improved Collaboration:

- Reduced Class Sizes and More Support:** One of the main recommendations from the group was to reduce class sizes to make inclusive education more manageable. The lack of structured support and the reliance on additional personnel, which must be applied for on a case-by-case basis, was seen as a significant shortcoming by German social partners in education.
- Focus on Individualized Education:** The group discussed the importance of individualized education plans for children with special needs. These plans are developed by multiprofessional teams and include specific social measures, learning materials, and specialized tools.



Good practices of social partners in education:

- German social partners in education highlighted several **positive examples of inclusion initiatives** such as specialist counselling at schools (*Ger. Fachberatung an der Schulen*), further trainings for social pedagogues (*Ger. Fortbildung fuer Sozialpädagogen*), digitalisation in social pedagogy, as well as organisation of inclusive sport festivals and theatre projects, barrier-free school buildings, cooperation with specialists and institutions (occupational therapy, speech therapy, etc.), mediation and anti-bullying programs, etc. which aim to promote collaboration between all students regardless of their abilities.
- Regarding the **social dialogue on inclusion of teachers and students with special needs**, social partners highlighted that there are a lot of formal discussions with the education personnel (*Ger. Personalvertretung*), as well as special education teachers about further training (*Ger. Sonderpädagogen zum Thema Fortbildung*), and semi-formal meetings called *Fachcafés Inklusion*.
- Regarding the **integration of education personnel with special needs**, unions and employers (at the local level) work together on finding the ways to ease the integration of such persons into their job. In the worst case if the teacher cannot find an appropriate schedule, the city administration searches for another school.
- The **lack of necessary professional skills for inclusion of persons with special needs is always a topic in social dialogue** in education in North Rhine-Westphalia, as it is a high priority for both unions and employers. On every level of education administration (local, *Bundesland*, federal), there is a designated person that unions can turn to regarding this issue.
- In 2020, VBE conducted a [survey](#) on **inclusion in schools** revealing significant challenges in implementing inclusive education in Germany. In its conclusions, VBE urged for more political action, resource allocation, and better support for teachers to improve inclusive education.



Recommendations

1. There needs to be a greater effort in creating coherent policies across *Bundesländer* to reduce the current patchwork of inclusion frameworks and improve consistency in support.
2. There is a pressing need for more specialised personnel (including special needs teachers and support personnel), infrastructure improvements, and financial investments in inclusive schools.
3. Incorporating special education training into the standard initial and continuous teacher training is critical for ensuring all teachers are adequately prepared to handle the diverse needs of students.
4. Streamlining the reporting and planning process for special needs teachers would allow them more time for direct engagement with students.
5. Continued investment in teacher recruitment, especially in the area of special needs education, is essential. Solutions to alleviate teacher shortages, such as improving work conditions or offering more professional development, should be explored, along with better support structures for teachers facing mental health challenges.
6. Increasing parental involvement and removing the social taboos around special needs in a more structured and proactive manner would help to ensure that children's needs are identified and addressed early, rather than allowing parents' reluctance to hinder the process.
7. More support systems should be put in place to manage education personnel stress and mental health, including more regular and accessible opportunities for dialogue with employers and stakeholders.

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