

## **G3ict – The Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs - webinar on inclusive education**

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2022**

- Inclusive education for learners with disabilities is a crucial issue. The quality of the education we offer young people will very likely determine their path in life and the opportunities they have as they grow older.
- It is also understandably quite a sensitive issue, because education is something very personal and the best approach depends on each individual. There is no one-size-fits all solution to offering inclusive education.
- At the European Disabilities Forum we advocate as much as possible for every child and their families to at least have the option to participate in inclusive educational settings. There are many reasons why we advocate for this option to be available to all. Firstly, it is because education in a mainstream, inclusive setting, when done with care and with the right support, can offer the opportunity to as many young persons with disabilities as possible to get a high quality education and receive recognised qualifications on the same level as their peers.
- Even when it is not the case that a learner will be able to complete the same curriculum or exams as their peers, the importance of being included in mainstream educational settings is the feeling of being fully part of your community, and visible to those around you rather than being hidden away. Even if a child with a learning disability for example, does not complete the same curriculum as their peers in the same school, the fact of attending the same physical educational institution can be hugely symbolic. It also instals from a young age a respect among all young people in the community for the diversity of our societies, and the worth of every person while embracing our differences.
- This principle is also true of adult learning. It is important that the opportunities for persons with disabilities to learn in inclusive settings do not end once they transition to adulthood. Possibilities for self-development, training and learning should always be open to all.
- In the European Union we see a lot of variation in how countries approach the education of learners with disabilities. In some countries like Italy, we see a long tradition of inclusive education with a relatively strict principle of not placing learners in segregated settings. In other countries such as in Germany and Belgium, the percentage of learners in special schools is still relatively high.
- With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the move to online learning for many young people in Europe and globally, we have seen further and unforeseen challenges to inclusive education. Here we are referring to the issue of the accessibility of online learning platforms and learning materials for persons with disabilities. All too often, especially at the start of the pandemic when online learning was a relatively new concept, online learning platforms could not be used by learners who were, for example, visually impaired. Learners who required support from classroom assistants were also especially at risk of falling behind, often relying on parents to take the place of trained educators to support them, or simply falling out of the education system completely.

### **What does the UNCRPD say about inclusive education?**

- Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines the general principles of what inclusive education is and why it is necessary. It sets out that States Parties

shall recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education by ensuring an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

- The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities responsible for monitoring and interpreting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities released its General Comment No. 4 on education. This general comment clarified that “only inclusive education can provide both quality education and social development for persons with disabilities, and a guarantee of universality and non-discrimination in the right to education.”
- Inclusive education is very important and its impact is reflected at an educational level. It allows all children to learn more effectively and contributes to more inclusive societies where children grow up with an appreciation of diversity and respect for our differences as human beings.
- The right to education applies to all children. In order to provide inclusive education, several things are necessary:
  - firstly, non-discrimination - all children with and without disabilities should be able to access education without discrimination;
  - non exclusion - children with disabilities must never excluded from the general education against their will or that of their families;
  - reasonable accommodation of educational settings - this should never be decided by a medical diagnosis of a child’s impairment but, instead, must be decided by looking at the barriers to education that a particular child faces
  - general support - individual educational plans should be designed for each learner with a disability with their full involvement, that of their family and their teachers. Trained teachers and classroom assistants are also crucial for making these individual educational plans to work.

**What would we like to see the EU do to help support inclusive education?**

- This is a tricky question, as education is famously one of the areas of policy where the Member States and even the regions within each country retain full competence.
- However, there is still a lot that the European Union can do. One of the main tools the EU has up its sleeve is the distribution of EU funds, particularly the European Social Fund Plus. We would like to see this money invested throughout the Member States to train teachers and classroom assistants in involving learners with disabilities in mainstream settings. We would also like money to go towards hiring more classroom assistants to offer personalised support to learners with disabilities in the classroom. Money should also go towards the provision of necessary assistive technology such as screen readers or Braille embossers to enable learners with disabilities to study autonomously, as well as for providing more sign language interpreters in schools to allow Deaf or hard-of-hearing children to learn and communicate in their first language.
- We would like to see funds such as the Regional Development Fund going towards making schools more physically accessible for persons with reduced mobility. This is especially important for older school buildings which remain completely inaccessible and simple cannot welcome persons with disabilities in their current state.

- We would also like to see the Member States use the COVID-19 Recovery and Resilience money to invest in educational reforms that put inclusiveness and accessibility at their heart, particularly in countries where the level of learners with disabilities in inclusive education remains low.
- Finally, the EU is looking increasingly at Digital Education, particularly through its European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. We would like all work on digital education and e-learning to prioritise setting standards for accessibility to reduce the ongoing risk of learners with disabilities having their education disrupted or halted due to accessibility issues.