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# Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Europe

Meeting report

June 2023



Co-funded by  
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# Inclusive education for an Inclusive Europe

## European expert meeting Key reflections and findings

June 2023

### Background

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According to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), all persons with disabilities have the right to access education on an equal basis with other. As signatory to this Convention, the European Union and all the EU members states have the legal obligation to guarantee this right.

Additionally, recent EU frameworks such as the EU Child Guarantee, the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European Care Strategy, have renewed the impetus around strengthening education systems for more inclusion and resilience.

Inclusive education represents fantastic opportunities regardless of the age. For infants, inclusive ECEC will support skills development, and by encouraging children with and without disability to interact, it contributes to lower stigma and makes children with disabilities visible in the educational landscape, facilitating their inclusion into compulsory education.

Parents who wish to can more easily re-enter the job market. Education does not and should not be restricted to compulsory formal education: inclusion in higher education, lifelong learning and non-formal education is also a keystone for the meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities and their families into society, having a positive effect on all. This vision of inclusive education beyond compulsory formal education represents the right as defined in the article 24 of the UNCRPD.

However, this right is far from being respected in the EU with **children with disabilities segregated to special education settings or denied their right to education, and adults with disabilities facing a shortage of possibilities** to engage in learning and training opportunities.

Starting from this reality and building on the results of the 2018 COFACE [conference](#) on sustainable and future-proof education systems, the COFACE-

Disability [back-to-school webinar](#) of 2020, the different practices highlighted in the [2021 S.H.I.F.T. report](#) and the expertise of COFACE Disability members, COFACE-Disability and the Regional Committee of AIAS Lombardy organised in March 2023 a 1-day European expert meeting on inclusive education in Monza (Italy).

Taking the Italian system as a starting point for discussion with European peers, the expert meeting brought together organisations of families of persons with disabilities and service providers, education professionals, persons with disabilities and their families and policy-makers from several countries to examine key actions to implement inclusive education in line with the UNCRPD and the [General Comment n4](#).

The objectives of this meeting were to look at challenges and solutions to boost inclusive education in Europe taking into consideration:

The keynote presentations are available at [www.coface-eu.org](http://www.coface-eu.org).

- The necessity to develop inclusive education for rolling out the independent living agenda and meaningful inclusion in society;
- Inclusive education needs to be considered from a life course perspective, namely inclusive education beyond compulsory education;
- Looking at the continuum of services between formal and non-formal education with an added focus on culture and sports.

This meeting allowed innovation and knowledge transfer between civil society organisations, created new synergies between COFACE and COFACE Disability members and key Italian and European stakeholders, and contributed to the [S.H.I.F.T.](#) towards more inclusive education systems in Europe.

# Programme

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## Welcome and round of introductions

Gaetano Santonocito, President of A.I.A.S.  
C.R.L. Comitato Regionale Lombardia

Chantal Bruno, Co-president of the COFACE  
Disability Platform

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## From theory to practice: the challenges and successes of implementing the Italian inclusive school legislation

*This session acts as a scene setter taking as a starting point the Italian system for inclusive education. The aim of this session is to give background to the EU audience but also to highlight the successes and shortcomings of the Italian system.*

**Moderator:** Gaetano Santonocito, President of A.I.A.S. C.R.L. Comitato Regionale Lombardia

### Keynote speaker:

- Giuseppe Arconzo, Associate Professor in Constitutional law and Rector's Delegate for Disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders in the University of Study of Milan, Italy

**Reaction:** Elisabeth Lammers, Vice-president in charge of European affairs, UNAPEI, France

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## Inclusive education at all ages: building blocks for inclusive society

*After having looked generally at the state of inclusive education in Italy and having a response from other EU countries, we will zoom in on different periods and actors of the education system, from early childhood education and care, to higher education/university with concrete examples of inclusive education in practice.*

**Moderator:** Sven Iversen, Director AGF, COFACE Vice-President, Germany

### Keynote speakers:

*Inclusive ECEC Services- Special responses for children with disabilities* - Renata Nacinovich, MD, Professor of Child Neuropsychiatry University of Milano Bicocca  
Head of Child and Adolescent Neuropsychiatry

Unit, S. Gerardo Hospital - ASST Monza Brianza, Italy

*Boosting the profession of support teachers in schools* - Prof. Antonio Prizio, Head Teacher Istituto Comprensivo Statale "Via Raiberti" Monza, Italy

*Inclusive higher education and mobility – from practice to policy-* Kamil Goungor, Policy and Movement Support Officer of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), Greece

**Reaction:** Dávid Berki, Never Give Up Foundation, Hungary

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## Inclusion in non-formal education and lifelong learning

*After a spotlight on the formal education path, we will broaden the scope to look at non-formal education in childhood and adulthood. How to foster inclusive settings in areas which although they do not belong to formal education plays a central role in inclusion and socialization.*

**Moderator:** Antonia Torrens, Director of KMOP, COFACE Vice-President, Greece

### Keynote speakers:

*Sport for inclusion programmes: enriching and empowering persons with disabilities through sports.* Cristian Fiora, Certified Club Manager, PGA Elite Golf Professional and AIAS Golftherapy trainer and Training Director AIAS, Italy

*The power of artistic collaboration between performers with and without disabilities* Gonçalo Solla, Director, Fundação Liga, Portugal

*Going the extra mile: Inspiring society with learning hubs for the future of inclusive learning, living and working in Flanders* Femke Houbrechts, Social Innovation and Education Coach, Konekt, Belgium

**Reaction:** Natalia Beraza, Institutional Relations Officer, FIAPAS, Spain

**What is Europe doing to boost inclusive education?**

**Moderator:** Camille Roux, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, COFACE

**Keynote speakers:**

Antonella Mangiaracina, Policy Officer, European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

Eugenia Casariego Artola, Development and Advocacy Coordinator, European Schoolnet

Caroline Meyers, Expert transnational cooperation and knowledge management,

Department Werk en Sociale Economie, Belgium

Alvaro Couceiro, Policy Officer, European Disability Forum

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**Concluding remarks: key recommendations and next steps**

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE Families Europe

Gaetano Santonocito, President of A.I.A.S. C.R.L. Comitato Regionale Lombardia

## Introduction

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**Gaetano Santonocito, President of A.I.A.S. C.R.L. Comitato Regionale Lombardia & Chantal Bruno, Co-president of the COFACE Disability Platform opened the meeting by welcoming the participants and wishing them a fruitful discussion.**

**Gaetano Santonocito** thanked the representatives from different AIAS branches all over Italy for their involvement and the European partners for having travelled to the city of Monza, highlighting that this diverse audience will foster peer exchanges and support knowledge sharing. He highlighted the importance of the UNCRPD, to which Italy is a signatory but for which, he noted, implementation is still lacking. These shortcomings have been and are still addressed by the families and the many associations that work to support disability rights in Italy and in Europe.

Thanks to these stakeholders, persons with disabilities can have a better access to education, habilitation and rehabilitation, autonomy improves and brings persons a step closer to inclusion. Nonetheless, some barriers such as the lack of funding and/ or experience and expertise can hinder their work and the realisation of the UNCRPD in Italy. He closed his speech by wishing that the content of the expert meeting will

contribute to address the knowledge gap for Italian and EU based participants.

**Chantal Bruno** carried on with the reflection on the importance of inclusive education by giving an historical overview of the different conventions and declarations guaranteeing this right. She then reflected on the notion of “special needs” that is seldom used in these documents, noting that this notion is extremely vague and undefined, potentially resulting in increased discrimination and exclusion for the very children it was aiming to protect. Instead, she argued that there should be a recognition that every child is unique with their unique interest, abilities, skills and learning needs, hence the notion of “special needs” should be replaced by “needs for specific educational responses” shifting the focus from the child or student to the shortcoming of system in place to meet individual needs.

She continued her introductory remarks by reminding the audience that in the world 1 out of 5 children, adolescents and young persons are still totally excluded from education and that disability is not always the cause: poverty, location, gender, language, disability, ethnicity, religion, migration or displacement status and other discrimination factors can deprive people of their right to education. Thus, to create inclusive education systems, political will

is crucial but not enough as what is needed is a true societal S.H.I.F.T. that will also raise awareness on the root causes of exclusion and discrimination. This can be achieved, as stated in the COFACE Disability Platform S.H.I.F.T. guide by *"encouraging an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities at all levels of the education system, including all children from the earliest age"*. She

concluded the introduction by expressing her eagerness to learn from other countries and to have the opportunity to discuss the full landscape of opportunities that inclusive education can offer, for children and adults in formal and non-formal settings.

## From theory to practice: the challenges and successes of implementing the Italian inclusive education system.

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The session started with words of apology sent by the Minister for Disability, Alessandra Locatelli, who had to cancel her attendance but sent a letter. She underlined the importance of the topic of inclusivity and the need to provoke a paradigm shift towards the whole-school approach, the importance of recruiting and training dedicated and competent staff and the need for increased support for the children in the most vulnerable situations. She highlighted the work done by the ministry for pushing forward a new educational plan and definition of disability and her dedication to seeing these initiatives come true and she thanked COFACE-Disability and AIAIS for organising the conference. Gaetano as the session moderator shared the letter with the audience, highlighting his professional experience and good collaboration with the minister when she was working in the third sector, praising her dedication to the rights of persons with disabilities in Italy. The full letter is available at [www.coface-eu.org](http://www.coface-eu.org).

The floor was then given to **Giuseppe Arconzo**, Associate Professor in Constitutional law and Rector's Delegate for Disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders in the University of Study of

Milan, who took the audience through **the evolution of inclusion in the Italian education system from 1950s to nowadays**. For the full presentation, please refer to the PowerPoint on the COFACE meeting webpage: [www.coface-eu.org](http://www.coface-eu.org).

In the school year 2021-2022, there were more than 316,000 students with disabilities in Italian schools, or 3.8% of the total, which is a steadily growing trend in the country. Since 1971, attendance in mainstream schools for children with disabilities has become the general rule making special schools an exception according to professor Arconzo.

The next came with the law of 1977 abolishing the special schools and introducing and developing the figure of the support teacher in the schools, making their presence compulsory. The current legislation is from 1992 (and corrective decrees) and states that every child has the right to attend mainstream education from kindergarden to university. This law does not prohibit the existence of special schools, but rather aims to guarantee universal access to mainstream classrooms regardless of the levels. Other characteristics of Italian schools favour

inclusion such as the Individual Education Plans that accompany children with disabilities through their educational journey – although as it was pointed out by a participant, this could constitute a stigmatisation for students with disabilities and the plans should be accessible to everyone upon request.

According to Professor Arconzo, the legislation in Italy is in line with the UNCRPD, but there are challenges in the implementation. For instance, the argument of the cost of inclusive education is often raised as an excuse not to be inclusive. This economic argument has however been rejected several times by Italian constitutional courts.

**Elisabeth Lammers, Vice-President in charge of European Affairs of UNAPEI** - the largest French community-based organisation advocating for and supporting 200 000 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families- , reacted to this intervention from a French perspective. In France, organisations working in the disability sector view the Italian model as a compass to follow. The French approach to inclusive education is more recent from the early 2000s and it is a quantitative one, leaving aside consideration for the quality of the support that is provided to children with disabilities. Several analyses of the shortcomings of the French system and its consequences for children and families can be found online as well as

recommendations on the priority areas to address. Elisabeth highlighted a 2018 report which identified key factors for the inclusion among which: stronger leadership and management, the development of more inclusive teaching practices, developing academic expectations targeted on the pupil, training of all education professionals, increase the number of professionals and their wages, redesign the place of people with disabilities in the school.



But the immediate policy priorities identified by UNAPEI for the French context is creating an inclusive educational environment, which is accessible, with special spaces allocated to rehabilitation and care in schools and ensure that people with disabilities have access to all school-based activities. In parallel there is an urgent need for awareness-raising such as putting in bullying and anti-violence strategies in place and improving the cooperation between care and education professionals to implement specialised support directly at school.

She concluded by reminding that it is not the children's duty to adapt to unfair

conditions in schools but it is the school's duty, and our responsibility as a society, to allow children with disabilities to fulfil their fundamental right which is the access to education. Inclusive education involves rethinking teaching expectations to meet

individual children's needs and this could only result in a better overall approach for all children to acquire knowledge and proceed into further education, regardless of disability.

## Inclusive education at all ages: building blocks for inclusive societies.

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This session was moderated by **Sven Iversen, Director of AGF and COFACE Vice-President** who brought his expertise on family policies and education systems in Germany and Europe into the moderation. This session illustrated the benefit of inclusive formal education from a life course perspective from Early Childhood Education and Care to higher education.

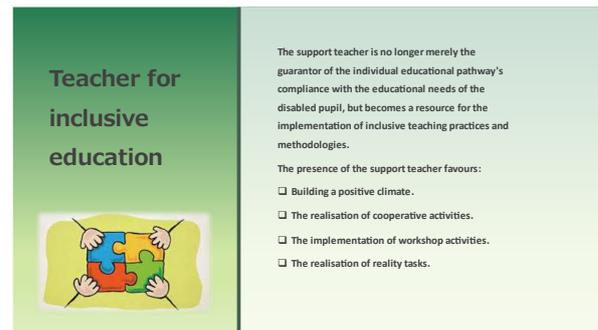
**Renata Nacinovich, MD, Professor of Child Neuropsychiatry** at the University of Milano Bicocca, and Head of Child and Adolescent Neuropsychiatry Unit, at the St. Gerardo Hospital, opened the discussion by reflecting on Inclusive ECEC Services. She reflected on the implementation of the inclusive education legislation in Italy, adding to the picture that was painted in the session before. The fundamental elements needed for the full inclusion are to act on the infrastructure and on the individuals at the same time. There is a need to adapt the

school environment with equipment and tools that will contribute to the pedagogical journey of every pupil. Adapted environments and tools can also support the adaptation of the communication techniques, such as the use of visual aids. This support should be integrated into the daily life of the class and rely on the individual educational plans to define goals and objectives. On the individual level, the school staff should be trained on inclusion and to be able to focus on building on every child's capacities, strengths and needs as they all deserve access to high quality education and inclusive activities. She highlighted the necessity to build a good collaboration between the parents/carers and the professionals and put the families' knowledge into contribution for school-based education purposes. In conclusion, she highlighted the benefits of inclusion for every child and stressed that there are no

acceptable excuses not to be inclusive of children with disabilities in ECEC.

The next speaker focused on primary school in an Italian context, homing in on the profession of support teacher. This specificities of the Italian education system requires that an extra teacher be dedicated to the classroom if a child with disabilities attends the class. This profession was created by the law 517/77 that created the right to “special forms of support”. At its creation, the support teacher followed a logic of compensation. It means that they were there to ensure 'support' interventions in the school targeted only at the pupil with disabilities: after analyses of the needs for adaptation, they identify the tools needed to compensate for them. This approach was closer to an integration logic rather than an inclusion one and was focusing on the student with disabilities only and on their “impairment”, following their Individual Education Plans.

Nevertheless, it has proven to be an effective and interesting starting point as it brought students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. With time going by the role evolved and with it the mindset around inclusion of students with disabilities. The support teacher is now part of a teaching team in a unified manner through coherent methodological and didactic choices suitable for all students in a spirit of didactic copresence for the classroom.



**Teacher for inclusive education**

The support teacher is no longer merely the guarantor of the individual educational pathway's compliance with the educational needs of the disabled pupil, but becomes a resource for the implementation of inclusive teaching practices and methodologies.

The presence of the support teacher favours:

- Building a positive climate.
- The realisation of cooperative activities.
- The implementation of workshop activities.
- The realisation of reality tasks.

This new conception became official with the reform of the Individual Education Plan in 2020 that now must include the assessment of the child in their environment and not in isolation as was the case before. All in all, the development of support teachers is inseparable from the development of inclusive education in Italy.

The last speaker on the panel was Kamil Goungor, Policy and Movement Support Officer of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), who built on his personal and professional experience to reflect on inclusive higher education and mobility, taking the audience from practice to policy. Kamil started by reminding the audience of data about higher education in the EU extracted from the recent resolution of the European Parliament towards equal rights for persons with disabilities which says: “whereas Eurofound research shows that between 2011 and 2016, the gap in third-level education attainment between persons with and without disabilities widened from 7 % to 9 %; whereas only 29,4 % of persons with disabilities attain a tertiary degree compared to 43,8 % of

those without disabilities”. Having experienced both segregated and inclusive education settings Kamil stressed that the benefits of inclusion are for the entire society and not just for the students themselves. Inclusive education whether it is formal or non-formal inclusive higher education is crucial for the social and economic well-being of our societies. It fosters innovation, promotes social cohesion, and creates a foundation for a more equitable and prosperous future. It is therefore a goal to achieve in itself but also a powerful enabler of the independent living agenda and the deinstitutionalisation process. He reflected more generally on the enablers of inclusive education such as accessibility and mobility. Technology and transport can enable inclusive education but they can also be sources of exclusion if they are not accessible. Therefore, the inclusive transition cannot be fully achieved by silo thinking and requires a societal movement, he refers to the COFACE Disability S.H.I.F.T. guide that illustrates this societal transition across 45 actions and 15 tools that involves all actors and sectors of the society. Finally, he reflected on the stress that is put on the students to access inclusive higher education due to the complexity and the uncertainties that

sometimes force students like himself to abandon education opportunities, sometimes very competitive, because of the lack of reasonable accommodation. This situation actually happened for both Kamil and his sister which led him to successfully advocate with the university of Leeds for the creation of an online Masters course that will be launched in Autumn 2023 and that would give a solution to student with disabilities to attends. This online solution will not be ideal, as disabled people should be able to study abroad if they wish, but he believes that this is a start. Finally, Kamil reminded everyone that inclusion in education is not only a fight on the student side but should also include staff with disabilities in higher education.

The panel was closed by a reaction by **Dávid Berki, representing the Never Give Up Foundation from Hungary.** David recommended to look at the topic of inclusion not only from our mind and human rights convention but also from the heart, because inclusion is about looking out for each other and building a community. Every individual has their own strengths and weaknesses, and all require different approaches, but all are entitled to the same quality of education.

# Inclusion in non-formal education and lifelong learning

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This session was moderated by **Antonia Torrens, Director of KMOP and COFACE Vice President**. Antonia has years of experience in developing adult learning courses in Greece where she was trained as an educational psychologist.

The exploration of inclusive non-formal education started with a focus on sports with **Cristian Fiora, Certified Club Manager and sports director at AIAS Monza in charge of the Golf Therapy Programme**. The project uses golf to teach diverse life skills and of course, to have fun. The programme is tailor-made for each participant and follows one of the two approaches developed to make the practice inclusive: dynamic and physical or the static approach. Both have the same benefits for the participants, but the teaching and playing method is different. The programme started with 12 persons and is now working with around 200 children and youth, some of the participants attended the conference and showed their support to the presentation and the positive experiences with the programme shared.

The panel then looked at the power of artistic collaboration between performers with and without disabilities with the presentation of **Gonçalo Solla, Director of the Fundação Liga** which runs the

programme Plural in Portugal. Plural is part of the “House of Art” programme run by Liga. The House of Art participants can take part in artistic workshops, developed in the areas of Contemporary Dance, Ceramics and Visual Arts, for the learning of personal skills and techniques in the different artistic fields. It promotes cultural and artistic opportunities to stimulate and develop the creative potential of each person, at any age and in any circumstance of their physical, psychic, social or cultural functionality, in strengthening their self-esteem and social recognition.

Plural is an inclusive dance company that has promoted human diversity through art for 28 years. It contributes to the social inclusion of people with disabilities, through access to culture and participation in training and artistic activities in the field of contemporary and inclusive dance through 3 lines of action: first, awareness-raising by promoting the visibility and public recognition of people with disabilities as full-fledged citizens and artists. The second action pillar is training which is not only for the performer but also an opportunity for students in partner institutions who can receive scholarships to work with the performers on the Plural choreographies. Lastly, Plural is changing

the dancing scene by promoting Inclusive Dance as a dance discipline in itself by fostering a greater inter-peer connection within the context of the dance community, facilitating the exchange of cross-methodologies between inclusive dance and contemporary dance.

The next presentation took a more global approach to non-formal education and took the audience to Belgium, where it is estimated that 1 out of 10 persons has a disability. The Brake-Out programme of Konekt acts as a learning hub for young adults where they can explore all the possibilities that life can offer them. It was presented by **Femke Houbrechts, Social Innovation and Education Coach at Konekt**, Femke is team leader for 2 of the 4 teams in the Brake-Out programme. The Brake-Out programme is about empowering the participants to break out of themselves and overcome the barriers that a non-inclusive society has imposed on them and made them believe they could not overcome. It starts from a growth mindset focused on the strengths of the person. The programme addresses self-esteem issues by adopting a personalised approach based on each individual talents and wishes, taking away the focus from the disabilities. Based on what the person wants to learn, Konekt will look for ways to make it happen by working with local businesses, companies, organisations supporting them to find ways to be inclusive. The learning

programme is for maximum 3 years for 2 days a week.

Brake out provides living examples of inclusion by giving the participants the possibility to participate in different activities - they showcase their potential not only to the Brake-out participant but to all the other attendees of the activity. Based on this example and her experience running the programme Femke gave recommendations to the audience on how to create projects that will promote inclusion:

- Make sure your project teaches not only people, but also society;
- Positivity and fun can be an engine for change;
- A lot of exclusion exists because of the imaginary average person.

**Natalia Beraza, the institutional relations officer of the Spanish Confederation of the Families of Deaf and hard of Hearing Persons – FIAPAS-**

. She reflected on access to non-formal education through the rights defined in the UNCRPD such as to take part in sports activities and cultural activities to reinforce the statement that there is no reason for which children with disabilities should be excluded. She then shared reflections from FIAPAS's experience on children with invisible disabilities, which can face other types of discrimination and exclusion, such as lack of hearing assistive devices.

For instance, some sports referees or coaches who request that hard-of-hearing children to take off their hearing aids during football games, using the argument of their safety only to offer them a very unsafe and impossible situation if they wish to stay on and play. There needs to be more awareness raising on participation in non-formal education and on the use that assistive technologies can have in sport so that they are not feared or misunderstood as unfair advantage or a way for participants to flout the rules and

in the access to cultural life in equal conditions to the others. She also mentioned the importance of providing children opportunities for self-representation and offering them strategies for being aware of their rights and the way to claim them. In this sense, she explained the Childhood Strategy implemented in FIAPAS for giving deaf and hard-of-hearing children the opportunity to express their view concerning the issues that affect them.

## What is Europe doing to boost inclusive education?

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The last panel of the day brought the conversation to the EU stage and moderated by **Camille Roux, Senior Policy and Advocacy officer at COFACE Families Europe**. Camille started the session by reminding that access to education was indeed a right that is technically legally guaranteed in the EU, but it was also a topic high on the European Agenda with the adoption of the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 that put inclusive education forward as one of the priority actions, but also of the EU Child Guarantee under which children with disabilities have been identified as a potential target group for EU Member States and which guarantees access to inclusive education and school-based activities. On the legislative side, even

through the use of soft law instruments the EU is seemingly pushing for the inclusive education agenda. But what else is happening concretely and what does Europe do to boost inclusive education?

This question was addressed to all the panellists, starting with **Antonella Mangiaracina, Policy Officer at European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**. The Agency is an independent organisation that acts as a platform for collaboration for the ministries of education in member countries to help member countries improve their inclusive education policy and practice for all learners. The agency work is in line with international and European Union initiatives to improve inclusive education and comes to support them by providing Member States with evidenced-based

information and recommendations, a multi-stakeholder approach that combines research, policy and practice and a platform for peer learning and experience exchange.

#### Agency work

- Agency work is in line with and directly supports **international and European Union policy initiatives** on education, equity, equal opportunities and rights for all learners



Evidence-based information



Multi-stakeholder approach



Collective voice



Peer learning



Antonella explained the different range of actions of the agency from their regular activities that are in relation with policy analysis to their thematic activities for which they are involved in different projects. They also support member countries in the European Union through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI). At this stage, they have provided support to Poland, Cyprus, Greece, Czech Republic and Portugal by analysing existing education systems' strengths and weaknesses. Based on this they draw recommendations for priority actions to then provided them support in developing reforms for implementing inclusive education.

The floor was then handed to **Eugenia Casariego, Advocacy & Development Officer at the European Schoolnet**, which is the network of 34 Ministries of Education that aims to bring innovation in education to key stakeholders. Their work is divided into thematic areas and they are

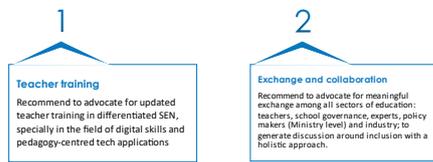
mainstreaming education through these different strands. Eugenia homed in on the topic of technology in education and digital skills in teaching and learning on which she is currently working. She stressed that accessibility was at the core of all the actions that they are developing through this branch as well as teacher training.

European Schoolnet believes that technology can be beneficial to all in an inclusive context, but some criteria must be met. First internet platforms must be accessible for all students, and Eugenia noted that this field has known great progress in the last years. It is also crucial that all the interaction with technology must be safe (for example, functionalities involving sounds, lights, movements, etc.; physical safety as well). In an educational context, technology must support pedagogy, and not the other way around. At the very core, technological applications and devices should enhance teaching & learning. Technologies should not be used for the sake of it and there is a need for increased attention to prevent technology from over-complicating learning processes, integrating short-duration complex applications.

The different approaches to integrate technologies in teaching should also be considered, For instance approaches like BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) or requiring homework activities with tech, might widen the gap between students and those with Special Needs Education (SEN) children -not only children with

disabilities- in mainstream education. Moreover, it might over-burden parents and caregivers.

Advocating for inclusive education



She finished her intervention by sharing with the audience concrete recommendations that COFACE can integrate in advocacy for inclusive education. She recommended to advocate for updated teacher training in differentiated SEN, especially in the field of digital skills and pedagogy-centred tech applications. She also called for meaningful exchange among all sectors of education: teachers, school governance, experts, policymakers (Ministry level) and industry; to generate discussion around inclusion with a holistic approach.

The floor was then handed over to **Caroline Meyers, Expert transnational cooperation and knowledge management at the Department Werk en Sociale Economie** in Flanders (Belgium), who brought the funding angle to the discussion. As an expert of the European Social Fund + she focused her presentation on this fund reminding the audience that the topic of social inclusion was gaining more and more traction. 25% of the ESF+ is earmarked for this. Under

the funding programmes, actions are organised around 2 pillars: promoting equal access to education and prevention of unqualified school dropout. She gave example of how EU funds were used in Flanders to improve inclusion around those two pillars. The “warm school” project for instance. In a Warm School, pupils follow personalized learning paths and they have a permanent team of teachers that follow them through the years of study and the subjects they are learning. The Warm School works according to the needs of each child, from its own context and is therefore inclusive. The focus is on well-being, solidarity, involvement and participation, as well as working on a community school.

EUROPA  
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Beleidsstandaard door de Europese Unie

**Which support can schools receive to become a Warm School**

- Platform where you will find the building blocks of a Warm School, tools to get started yourself and answers to your questions
- Organize visits to existing Warm Schools
- Training for managers and for the participants of candidate Warm Schools
- Scanning and measuring instruments with which schools can check how far they are and which activities they still need to do
- Coaching programs for schools that require tailor -made guidance
- Learning networks between candidate Warm Schools and existing Warm Schools
- Annual event where you can share experiences.

For instance, in recent years, the Flemish government decided to take action to improve the general literacy of the population by launching a programme to improve reading schools across the board. Different organisations work together on the improvement of Flemish preparatory language and reading education, so that children who grow up in an underprivileged home environment can still optimally start formal reading education. Caroline finished her address

by reminding the audience that inclusivity should not only be seen through the disability lens but that an intersectional vision was needed as there are many barriers to be addressed in order to create a truly inclusive school.

The last speaker of the day was **Alvaro Couceiro, Policy Officer from the European Disability Forum (EDF)**, who brought back the focus on Human Rights. He reminded the audience that education was an exclusive competence of EU Member States, which means that the European Union is quite limited in this sector but its potential should still not be underestimated. He reminded that the EU itself and all the 27 Member States have ratified the UNCRPD and that this is a binding document. However, in a Eurostat survey conducted in 2018, it was found that in the EU, the proportion of people aged 25-64 with higher education was 35.6% for those without disabilities, compared with only 19.6% for those with disabilities, this also has impact on the capacities to integrate the labour market with only 1 out of 3 persons with disabilities currently in employment in the EU, which is an unbearable statistic. He added that the EU year of Skills should be used as a lever to address the discrimination faced by students with disabilities.

He carried on by asking to mainstream inclusive education into all policy areas. For instance he underlined the importance of the Web Accessibility Directive and the European Accessibility Act and their beneficial effects in education. He mentioned the use of EU funds in order to boost the inclusive education and the independent living agenda and the fact that, in theory EU money cannot fund structures that favour exclusion. In reality, this is still happening, and stronger monitoring mechanisms should be put in place. He raised the problem of the non-recognition of disabilities between different Member States which hinder the possibility to access support when going to study in another EU country- this is a major barrier to inclusive education and mobility, which can explain why at the moment there are only 0,24% of students applying for disability-related support in Erasmus +. EDF is advocating for the EU Disability Card to be extended and to cover education as well.

To conclude this session all speakers added a few words stressing that even if there is still a long way to go to achieve inclusive education in Europe there are a variety of mechanisms in place which prove that there is a willingness at the European level to provide guidance and move towards more accessibility.

## Concluding remarks: key recommendations and next steps

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Gaetano Santonocito concluded the panel by thanking all the participants for the attendance and highlighting the fact that even in Italy there was still a long way to go to make the education system truly inclusive.

The meeting was formally closed by Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE, who thanked AIAS and all the speakers for the great contributions. She reassured the participants and the audience that the learning of the day will be taken on and integrated into COFACE advocacy for all children and persons with

disabilities to have access to quality inclusive education.

## Organisers

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**The COFACE Disability Platform for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Families** (COFACE-Disability) was founded by COFACE in 1998 to improve the representativeness of people with disabilities and their families. With more than 20 members, COFACE-Disability fights for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and for sufficient, appropriate care provision and services, close-to-home and in-home help services for people with support needs and their families to be made available in all Member States, and

for resources, assistance and provision to be harmonised within the EU.

COFACE-Disability defends the need to develop public care infrastructures supporting persons with disabilities and their families following a life cycle, whole family approach, boosting independent living and meaningful inclusion from birth to old age. This includes specific service provision that responds to the needs of persons with disabilities and their families but also to the removal of barriers in mainstream services. The topic of this event, inclusive education, lies at the

intersection of these two necessary paradigm shifts.

**Monza A.I.A.S., Associazione Italiana per l'Assistenza agli Spastici** is a private non-profit organisation and Association of Social Promotion founded as an Association of parents, friends and people interested in the social and scholastic integration of children with neurolesions, and in the search for the best possibilities for self-sufficiency and autonomy in order to guarantee their integration into society.

Founded in 1954 in Rome, today AIAS is present throughout Italy in 18 regions, thanks to the support of 8,000 Members and the activities of 91 Sections, 4,000 operators and over 1,000 volunteers who work in close cooperation with each other and with the head office in Rome. Many A.I.A.S. Sections promoted the establishment of Rehabilitation Centres, which would provide prevention and treatment for motor and intellectual disabilities of children with childhood cerebral palsy. A.I.A.S. - Città di Monza - ONLUS was established in 1973 and the Rehabilitation Centre was activated in 1979. An increasingly global vision of the health, emotional and social aspects of their service beneficiaries has led AIAS to experiment new services and therapeutic interventions, in a careful balance between the needs of the users, methodological rigour and the data of scientific research in this field. This global

vision has been made possible by a fruitful exchange between technicians and parents.

**For more information, please contact Camille Roux:** [croux@coface-eu.org](mailto:croux@coface-eu.org).

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