

# Inclusion of autism

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## Valorization

This thesis identified several vital points that can be used to spearhead the development of inclusive education in the EU. To do this, however, it is important that a shared vision is created among stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, teaching staff, and community members). In the previous section, an overview of stakeholder analyses regarding the development of inclusive education is already provided. Scenario planning involves the definition of a desired, shared vision of the future, as to better prepare professionals to be successful in a constantly shifting environment [36] and has been used by the European Commission before to set the agenda on the future of the European Union [37].

In the QCA, it was explained how availability of SEN services, mixed mainstream classrooms, inclusive education policies, and support for teaching staff (i.e. high-quality education, as well as networks of professionals that provide support) are vital to the development of inclusive education and how the latter three are inconsistently present across the EU. The following scenarios explore various possibilities in terms of decision-making, priority setting, and structural improvement through policy in order to further enhance inclusive education in the EU. The scenarios are illustrative in nature in order to provoke thought and discussion. They are *not* detailed blueprints or policy prescriptions. They also intentionally do not mention legal or institutional processes—the form will follow the function. The possibilities covered here range from the current situation as-is, to a change of scope and priorities, to a partial or collective leap forward. There are overlaps between scenarios, meaning they are neither mutually exclusive, nor exhaustive. The final outcome will unquestionably be different from the way these scenarios are presented, since education systems differ per country and developing one system requires social, cultural, and national policy characteristics to be accounted for as well.

The starting point of each scenario is an integrative education system in which autistic children that can adapt to mainstream education are admitted. This starting point was chosen because this is the most common educational environment currently present in the EU based on the policy analyses. Afterwards, the rationale behind why and how a scenario would play out, its impact on the education system, and the advantages and disadvantages are discussed. Finally, the policy impacts and some illustrative snapshots of circumstances that could happen in that scenario are displayed.

### ***Scenario One: Continuing the Current Trajectory***

#### *Why and How?*

In a scenario where EU Member States stick to their current course, the education system is incrementally changed to facilitate inclusion and remains integrative rather than inclusive for a long time. This course will likely meet the objectives set out in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, Salamanca Statement, and the Sustainable Development Goals that pertain to inclusion eventually. In doing so, EU Member States continue to combat segregation of education and gradually offer more autistic children the required support. The rate of change depends on the national policy agendas, the support that inclusive education receives at the executive level, and the attitude that the community shows towards the implementation of inclusive education.

#### *Changes to the Education Systems*

This scenario portrays a slow and steady development of inclusive education by augmenting existing policy to slowly introduce a more elaborate infrastructure for teachers and supporting staff. Autistic children who can adapt to mainstream education can continue to participate in mixed classrooms. Those who cannot, however, continue to be segregated in special schools or specialist facilities depending on the country in question.

Teachers remain predominantly responsible for all the in-classroom needs of autistic children. They continue feeling underprepared to work with autistic children as a result of a lack of training and will receive little to no support from other disciplines due to there being no such network established. Consequently, their negative attitudes towards inclusive education persist, though they continue to work in mixed mainstream classrooms. Policy remains non-specific with regards to providing guidance for SEN, particularly autism.

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

This scenario builds upon the current education systems that already partially admit autistic children in mainstream classrooms. SEN services are provided outside of these mixed mainstream classrooms, thus enabling autistic children to grow next to their non-autistic peers. This system focuses on optimizing the current system and only resorts to larger changes once a barrier cannot be addressed by the resources in place. Problems that lie under the surface, such as attitudinal and motivational problems, will likely persist, as these are not as easily recognizable as, for example, a problem in infrastructure.



## Impact on Policies

SEN Services for Children	Mixed Classrooms	Inclusive Education Policy	Teacher Support
SEN services are provided outside of mixed mainstream classrooms	Mixed mainstream classrooms are outlined that autistic children can attend as long as they are able to adapt to the curriculum set out for all children in mainstream education	Policies that are aimed at developing inclusive education remain non-specific when addressing SEN, in particular autism	Teachers remain responsible for the needs of autistic children in their classes; they are insufficiently prepared to work with autistic children; they receive little to no support from other disciplines



## Illustrative Snapshots

- Autistic children have access to the additional resources they need to meet their educational needs, even though they may have to rely on multiple institutions to acquire them.
- Mainstream education is available for autistic children that can participate by adapting. Children that cannot adapt are moved to specialised facilities where they are educated.
- Little clarity is provided at the policy level on how to work with autistic children. This puts the responsibility to create and develop good practices with teachers and runs the risk of creating an unequal environment in terms of the quality of education and educational practices that are provided to autistic children.
- Teachers are reluctant to actively work with autistic children in mixed mainstream classrooms due to their lack of preparation and training.
- Other experts and disciplines are not actively involved in the education of autistic children. They may be involved outside of education and have an indirect effect, but are not actively present inside of schools.

## ***Scenario Two: Committing to Inclusion***

### *Why and How?*

In a scenario where EU Member States commit to developing and enhancing inclusive education quicker, more elaborate actions are implemented. This course will more swiftly achieve the objectives of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, Salamanca Statement, and the Sustainable Development Goals surrounding inclusive education. This course is also more focused on the actual development of inclusion in education, rather than improving and further building a system of integration first.

### *Changes to the Education Systems*

This scenario is characterized by large-scale changes to the education system in a shorter time span. These changes cover renewed and improved teacher training courses, collaborations with other professionals to be able to better address the SEN of a child in a school environment, and specified policies with regards to (clusters of) SEN.

As a result, the transition from integration to inclusion becomes clearer. The negative attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education is mitigated by the improved training courses and multidisciplinary support networks. Due to the active involvement of other professionals in the education of autistic children inside the school environment, pressure is further alleviated from teachers as they can predominantly focus on the educational needs of autistic children. Due to the specific guidelines and best practices outlined in inclusive education policy, a centralised foundation is created upon which the delivery of high-quality education to autistic children is built.

### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

This scenario acknowledges that systemic changes are required to fully realise an inclusive environment and that teachers alone are not sufficient for such an environment. Addressing health, educational, social, and other needs of autistic children is more streamlined due to the multidisciplinary collaboration inside the school environment. Policies outline best practices and provide clarity on how to work with autistic children. Nevertheless, achieving these goals requires a structural change that goes beyond the school environment and also encompasses teacher training, national policy, and other professional fields.



## Impact on Policies

<b>SEN Services for Children</b>	<b>Mixed Classrooms</b>	<b>Inclusive Education Policy</b>	<b>Teacher Support</b>
SEN services are imbedded in the school environment and can be provided swiftly	Mixed classrooms allow for the uptake of all autistic children; care can be provided as necessary due to the collaborations between professionals	Policies are specific with regards to (a group of) SEN and set out best practices to be used in education; examples of bad practice are also highlighted in policies	Teachers are responsible for the educational needs of autistic children in their classes; they receive life-long training to sharpen their competencies in working with autistic children; they are supported by an array of professionals of other fields



## Illustrative Snapshots

- The provision of SEN services is incorporated in the school environment and occurs in a collaborative effort between professionals.
- All children on the autism spectrum are able to participate in a mixed classroom, receiving appropriate health and educational support where necessary.
- Policies are designed more elaborately, now including a list of best practices when working with autistic children, such as what professionals should be present in an educational institution to ensure proper provision of SEN services in a school environment. Alternatively, the list can cover best practices when working with children with developmental conditions. Policies also specify bad practices and behaviour to avoid around autistic children/children with developmental conditions.
- Teacher attitudes towards inclusion are improved as a result of the added and improved training they receive as part of their standard teacher training as well as additional courses aimed at life-long learning.
- Psychologists, speech therapists, social workers, physical therapists and other professionals receive training to work in collaboration with teachers in a school environment.

### ***Scenario Three: Reversing to Segregation***

#### *Why and How?*

In a scenario where EU Member States seek to address the more resource-intensive SEN without structurally reforming the education system, a stronger division of the education system in mainstream and special education facilities arises. The course of this scenario strays from the values of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, Salamanca Statement, and the Sustainable Development Goals that pertain to inclusive education and social inclusion.

#### *Changes to the Education Systems*

This scenario is defined by a focus on splitting the education system in mainstream and special education. Autistic children are still able to participate in education, but are separated from their non-autistic peers in special classrooms, where their educational needs are addressed. Policies that pertain to inclusive education are non-existent in this scenario. Teacher training is specified into two categories: (1) teachers that work in mainstream education; and (2) teachers that focus on working in special education.

As a result, the right to education for all children is still intact. Nevertheless, the segregation of children with and without SEN results in a decrease of social uptake of people with disabilities later in life. Negative attitudes towards mixed classrooms diminish as a result of the segregation, as teachers can choose to work with children in either mainstream or special classrooms.

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

This scenario acknowledges that autistic children require an array of support that can differ per child. It adapts its education system to provide specialised classrooms in which these children can participate in education and develop themselves. However, this adaptation of the education system to separate autistic children from their typical peers is also detrimental to their social uptake and development, both during their formative years and in later life. This separation may also risk that the negative attitudes are directed to children with mild SEN that are admitted to mainstream classrooms. Effectively, this scenario allows discrimination on the basis of disability to be (re)introduced in the formation of classrooms.



## Impact on Policies

<b>SEN Services for Children</b>	<b>Mixed Classrooms</b>	<b>Inclusive Education Policy</b>	<b>Teacher Support</b>
SEN services are provided in special schools or facilities where autistic children also receive their education	Classrooms in special education facilities incorporate a range of children that each has their unique SEN	Policies that focus on the development of inclusive education are non-existent; policies set out measures that enforce a segregated education environment based on disability status	Teacher training is split in training the focuses on mainstream education and special education respectively; teachers are also assisted by other staff present in the special facilities



## Illustrative Snapshots

- Autistic children are separated from their typical peers and receive education in a specialised environment that can tend to their individual SEN. SEN service provision is incorporated in these specialised institutions.
- Children with different SEN are admitted together in smaller class sizes in which they are less prone to overstimulation and where they can receive more individual attention from teachers and supporting staff.
- Policies are designed to separate typical children from children with SEN, essentially gauging their capabilities based on disability status.
- Teacher's negative attitudes towards inclusion of autistic children in mixed classrooms dissolves as teachers can now decide whether they are willing to work in mainstream or special classrooms specifically during their teacher training.
- Specialized institutions employ a wide spectrum of professionals in addition to the teachers that aid in taking care of and developing the children admitted to that institution.

## ***Scenario Four: Intentional Social Distancing***

### *Why and How?*

In a scenario where EU Member States coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) pandemic measures remain in place for a prolonged period of time, action is taken to retain the current level of social inclusion and actively adapt the education system to match. This course takes an innovative and adaptive approach to the values of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, Salamanca Statement, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

### *Changes to the Education Systems*

This scenario shows the adaptability of the education system in the face of public health emergencies through remote-controlled classrooms, smaller in-person class sizes, and clear and direct instructions of expectations and tasks for children. Teachers are supported by teaching assistants, as well as by the parents or caretakers at home, who are actively involved in the education process. Policies specify good practices when working with autistic children (or children with developmental disorders). Other professionals are connected with teachers and children to aid in addressing the non-educational needs of the child and relieve pressure from teachers.

As a result, autistic children still connect with their teacher and their non-autistic peers. The negative attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education are addressed by the involvement of other professionals. Due to the specific guidelines and established good practices in policy, a centralised foundation for the provision of high-quality education is created as well.

### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

This scenario warrants the continued inclusion of autistic children in mainstream education and can advance that further. It guarantees that autistic children—who are already vulnerable to poor mental health that can be exacerbated by the pandemic [39]—are not further isolated. It both limits the number of changes to the daily routine of autistic children and makes sure the education trajectory of autistic children remains largely uninterrupted. However, this method limits face-to-face contact with teachers and relies heavily on communication through digital means, which may pose a problem for some children that experience difficulties in these areas.



## Impact on Policies

SEN Services for Children	Mixed Classrooms	Inclusive Education Policy	Teacher Support
SEN services are provided remotely or in rooms specifically set up for in-person contact	Mixed classrooms are further enhanced due to the general limitation of the number of children that are allowed to be present in a single classroom	Policy is focused on prescribing good practices for working with autistic children remotely	Teacher training includes a course on remote education; specialist courses are provided for specific conditions; professionals are connected with teachers to support them in working with autistic children remotely



## Illustrative Snapshots

- SEN services are provided remotely as much as possible. Only when necessary are specialised rooms prepared in which autistic children can freely interact with the professional.
- Due to the reduced class sizes, autistic children can more easily join the mixed classrooms. Further measures to facilitate inclusion are taken in the forms of regular check-ups and remote assistance of parents and children by teachers and professionals.
- Policies' aim is keeping the education system as remote as possible and focuses on communicating good practices that can be performed through remote classes or at a safe distance.
- As a result of the improved teacher training curriculum, the negative attitude regarding inclusive education and mixed classrooms is minimal. This is further expanded by the involvement of professionals to work with both teachers and children to divide the responsibilities for addressing health and education needs.

### ***Scenario Five: Slow Response to Social Distancing***

#### *Why and How?*

In a scenario where EU Member States keep the COVID-19 measures in place intermittently due to fluctuations in the spread of disease, teaching infrastructure can be insufficiently supported and adapted to the new environment in which teachers have to shift between in-person and remote teaching. As a result, autistic children run the risk of receiving insufficient assistance or provision of SEN services to ensure continuity of high-quality education. The course of this scenario deviates from the values of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, Salamanca Statement, and the Sustainable Development Goals that pertain to inclusive education and social inclusion.

#### *Changes to the Education Systems*

This scenario shows marginal changes to the education system and attempts to pursue the same course as Scenario One. However, the frequent yet irregular shifts between in-person and remote provision of education and SEN services result in the creation of policy that lags behind the current situation and does not address remote teaching infrastructure in a timely manner.

Teachers remain primarily in charge of the provision of SEN in addition to education and they are insufficiently trained to switch between providing education in-person and remotely. Their already existing feelings of unpreparedness are exacerbated by the new and chaotic circumstances. Negative attitudes towards inclusive education can increase due to these added complications. Policy remains non-specific with regards to providing guidance for SEN, particularly autism.

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

This scenario, like Scenario One, builds upon the current education systems that already partially admit autistic children in mainstream classrooms and focuses on optimizing the current system and only resorts to larger changes once a barrier cannot be addressed by the resources in place. This approach, however, can lead to a lack of established clarity and additional resources for teachers to continue to offer high-quality education. As a result, it is not only detrimental to the continuity of education of autistic children, but also to their mental health, especially considering they are already at heightened risk of mental ill-health [38].



## Impact on Policies

SEN Services for Children	Mixed Classrooms	Inclusive Education Policy	Teacher Support
Over time, a system in which SEN services can be provided in-person and remotely are created to ensure continuity	Mixed classrooms exist in which autistic children can develop themselves next to their non-autistic peers; children that cannot adapt to a mixed classroom are moved to a separate facility	Due to the frequent, yet irregular shifts between in-person and remote education, the development of policy that addresses the combination of both circumstances is slow	Teacher remain responsible for the SEN of the autistic children in their classes; teacher training is not adapted to account for the remote environment; other professionals are not involved in the education trajectory



## Illustrative Snapshots

- SEN services are intended to be provided remotely or in-person. However, due to constant shifts between the two approaches, provision of services is chaotic and inconsistent.
- Mixed classrooms continue to exist remotely and in-person where autistic and non-autistic children co-develop. Class sizes remain unchanged due to the frequent shift to the standard environment.
- Policies remain non-specific with regards to autism (or developmental conditions as a cluster) and split focus between developing the education system on par with the intended course (see Scenario One) and adjusting to the new circumstances of frequently and irregularly shifting between in-person and remote teaching.
- Teachers are not specifically (re)trained to work with children with SEN remotely. Attitudes regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education as a whole further deteriorate.
- Professionals are neither (re)trained for nor included in providing SEN services remotely, further risking inconsistent service delivery.

### ***Moving Forward***

The inclusion of people with disabilities in education and in wider society has become an increasing priority after the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, Salamanca Statement, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The five outlined scenarios each hold their distinct advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of which of the scenarios turns out to be closest to reality, each respective scenario aims to achieve the same goal from an educational perspective: to provide autistic children with high-quality education and allow them to develop to their full potential. That being said, these scenarios are aimed to open an honest and wide-ranging debate on how EU Member States should develop their education systems in the years to come without prescribing a definitive conclusion. They also do not consider economic and resource feasibility, population attitude, and national priorities.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each respective EU Member State to develop their education system. However, engaging in open dialogue and learning from the successes and mistakes of other EU Member States can prove to be invaluable to smooth the development process. When looking to translate a practice from another EU Member State, social, cultural, attitudinal, and policy factors should be considered and how these affect the practice in the original settings versus how these may affect the practice in the destination.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that autistic children and their families face many obstacles, allowing them to develop themselves in educational settings yields long-term benefits, even more so when the educational setting is inclusive in nature. However, the understanding and implementation of inclusive practices is still in its infancy. This thesis aimed to highlight key policy areas that could benefit the development of inclusive practices for autistic children by mapping autism and (special) education policies in EU Member States and synthesising the findings as part of the policy mapping project of EDUCAUS. While doing so, values of international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities were compared to national policy to see whether these values were integrated at a national level.

The right to education for autistic children (and SEN in general)—set out by the UDHR, Convention on Rights of the Child, and Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons—was adopted by all regions (n=30) under study. They unanimously created and implemented facilities and services that aim to aid children with various conditions to enjoy their right and access to education. The vast majority of countries (n=28; except Slovenia and the German community in Belgium) further developed their respective education systems according to the values of the Salamanca Statement and CRPD, which stress that children with SEN should be admitted to one single form of education: inclusive education. Subsequently, different factors that influence the development of (inclusive) education were investigated in the respective papers. Firstly, active parental involvement, while deemed valuable by literature for the development of inclusive systems for children with SEN, was limited. More specifically, parents rarely had influence on the actual approaches that teachers use to reach their child (n=2; Finland and Flanders-Belgium) and, instead, were found to play a more passive role in the majority of cases (n=28)—being allowed to choose the school that their child would attend and subsequently be informed by the teacher on the progress on the child. Secondly, teachers were found to hold massive responsibilities on the education of children with SEN—even more in comparison to neurotypical children. The identification of support services for teachers in many countries (n=23, of which 13 elaborate) can therefore be considered a positive finding of this research, especially given the beneficial effects that results from additional education for teachers. Thirdly, different forms of tensions were investigated, namely the tension that small states experience in implementing international guidance and the tension that may have risen when countries formerly part of the Soviet Union adopted the UN-based human rights ideology. On the topic of education, little tension was discovered in small states. All adopted services and approaches to enable children with SEN to follow education, though in terms of inclusion policies, they were found to be less elaborate. This finding was justified because of the comparatively smaller burden of disease that is experienced by these countries. The influences of the former Soviet Union were only noticeable in transition periods from the communist to the UN ideology. Afterwards, all policies were either amended or replaced by modernized versions that held the UN ideology as foundational framework. Finally, approaches to inclusion were found to widely differ across the EU—though seven common elements could be identified from these different approaches and used to identify trends. The introduction of mixed mainstream classes was indicated to be a critical factor in developing inclusion, while parental involvement and the

respective absence of teacher support and a definition on inclusion were suggested as obstructive factors.

All this data helped us build a preliminary model for the development of inclusion and it is key that this model be further developed with data in- and outside of the EU in order to guarantee the education for autistic children globally. Currently, autistic children have access to education everywhere within the EU, though areas of improvement still exist. Nevertheless, there is no sign of infringement of the right to education for autistic children.

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