

# Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education

Literature Review



**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



# **RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ALL LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

**Literature Review**

**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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Secretariat  
Østre Stationsvej 33  
DK-5000 Odense C Denmark  
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20  
[secretariat@european-agency.org](mailto:secretariat@european-agency.org)

Brussels Office  
Rue Montoyer, 21  
BE-1000 Brussels Belgium  
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80  
[brussels.office@european-agency.org](mailto:brussels.office@european-agency.org)

[www.european-agency.org](http://www.european-agency.org)



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full version</b>
ADHD:	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Agency:	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
COST:	European Cooperation in Science and Technology
CPD:	Continuing professional development
ET 2020:	Education and Training 2020
EU:	European Union
ICT:	Information and communication technology
ITE:	Initial teacher education
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OoP:	Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education
PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLCs:	Professional Learning Communities
PTAs:	Parent-teacher associations
RA:	Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education
RA4AL:	Raising Achievement for All Learners – Quality in Inclusive Education
SEN:	Special educational needs
UK:	United Kingdom
UNCRPD:	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO IITE:	UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education
UNICEF:	United Nations Children’s Fund







## 1. PREAMBLE

In 2010, the member countries of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) identified raising achievement for all learners as a key issue for investigation. As a result, in spring 2011, the Agency submitted an application for Raising Achievement for All Learners – Quality in Inclusive Education (RA4AL) as a project supported under European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme Comenius funding. The Agency was awarded the grant and the project (517771-LLP-1-2011-1-DK-COMENIUS-CAM) ran from December 2011 to November 2012. Further information on this project (phase 1 of a further three-year project) is available on the RA4AL web area ([www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/ra4al](http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/ra4al)).

The three-year (phase 2) Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education (RA) project considers the findings and recommendations of the previous RA4AL work. The latter identified the following themes that are considered critical in raising achievement: *Collaborative policy and practice; support for school and system leaders; inclusive accountability; personalisation through listening to learners; professional development for inclusive education; pedagogical approaches for all* (European Agency, 2012a).

The following activities were identified as priorities for the new RA project:

- Research on inclusive pedagogical approaches and strategies to raise achievement
- A study of school leaders' role in supporting strategies for raising achievement. These may be through, for example, a collaborative school culture, a focus on learning (for staff and learners), the involvement of parents/carers/families, and effective monitoring and feedback, particularly in relation to disadvantaged learners and those susceptible to underachievement.

The RA project targets decision-makers at both local and national levels. It aims to provide evidence of effective practice in raising achievement and building the capacity of schools and communities to include and support all learners. It involves a range of stakeholders including school leaders, researchers, teachers, parents and learners, as well as local and national policy-makers.

The schools involved in the project include learners from the compulsory school and upper-secondary school sectors. The project aims to raise the achievement of all learners. However, it especially focuses on challenging issues, like raising the achievement of vulnerable groups, such as, for example, learners with disabilities.

This literature review addresses some of the main issues presented above and provides an overview of research relating to the project focus. It particularly



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considers the kind of information and approaches that can best support schools' effectiveness, given the increasing diversity of today's classrooms.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

The high cost of school failure and inequity for individuals – and for society more widely – is increasingly being recognised across Europe. Raising the achievement of all learners is seen not just as a policy initiative, but as an ethical imperative. The Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) Framework recognises the important role of inclusive education. It highlights the need to address educational disadvantage by providing high-quality early childhood education and targeted support and by promoting inclusive education (European Commission, no date).

According to UNESCO (2009), inclusion and quality are reciprocal. Access and quality are linked and are mutually reinforcing and central to ensuring inclusive education. The OECD (2012) points out that the highest performing education systems are those that combine quality with equity. Further research notes that greater equality not only improves the well-being of whole populations, but also raises national standards of achievement (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Recent work by UNICEF notes that some children will always fall behind the average in education, but asks: ‘Is there a point beyond which falling behind is not inevitable but policy susceptible, not unavoidable but unacceptable, not inequality but inequity?’ (2010, p. 1).

Greater efforts are needed to ensure that all learners, particularly those from vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, can gain full access to a quality education. All learners must achieve key competences to enable them to remain engaged in education and support them to move into employment. This further reduces the risk of social exclusion in the longer term.

In particular, with regard to vulnerable learners, *Rethinking Education* notes that:

*Member States need to introduce new systemic reforms to strengthen early screening and intervention for learning difficulties and to replace repetition or ability grouping with increased learning support* (European Commission, 2012a, p. 4).

The focus, therefore, is on building schools’ capacity to raise achievement and close the gap between higher and lower achievers.

This literature review particularly highlights the strategies that can best support learning communities to undertake organisational development and enable school leaders to raise the achievement of all learners through collaborative approaches. In this way, it provides the RA project partners with relevant and enlightened support for school improvement. It also presents Agency member countries with a summary of the current state of knowledge.



### 3. METHODOLOGY

This review draws on recent literature to examine effective ways to raise the achievement of all learners in inclusive settings. More specifically, it aims to provide a summary and synthesis of the most relevant research results in relation to the RA project's key questions:

- What pedagogical strategies and teaching approaches (e.g. use of ICT, focus on key competences) best support learning and are effective in raising the (academic and social) achievement of all learners?
- How can school leaders best support:
  - the development, implementation and monitoring of inputs and processes for raising achievement?
  - the participation of learners and parents/carers in the learning process?
  - the 'measurement' of all forms of achievement and analysis of outcomes to inform further development?

The material was collected through several extensive searches of journal articles, books and book chapters, conference papers and proceedings, theses, dissertations and reports. The literature review was firstly based on a search of key terms drawn from the previous Agency projects: Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education (OoP, 2013; [www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/organisation-of-provision](http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/organisation-of-provision)) and Raising Achievement for All Learners – Quality in Inclusive Education (RA4AL, 2012; [www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/ra4al](http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/ra4al)). These terms focused on the organisation of support for the development of inclusive education and raised achievement for all learners. A set of agreed search terms to guide the review was subsequently tested out in a particular database. New terms were added or existing terms were altered or removed. The main body of the literature was selected through systematic searches of online library catalogues (such as ERIC, British Library and University College London Institute of Education library) and journal databases (such as SAGE and Taylor & Francis). Broader searches of internet sources were carried out via general search engines, such as Google Scholar. The search period was set to 2006–2015, with a few exceptions where research was considered to be particularly significant.

The general key terms used in the initial search were:

- Successful school leadership and raised achievement for all learners

(Hits: Google Scholar 19,000; Sage 1,808; Taylor & Francis 7,716)



- Pedagogical strategies and raised achievement for all learners

(Hits: Google Scholar 18,600; Sage 1,007; Taylor & Francis 3,387)

- Pedagogical approaches and raised achievement for all learners

(Hits: Google Scholar 16,700; Sage 970; Taylor & Francis 6,665).

Further documents were also selected from bibliographical lists found in relevant articles and books and/or based on suggestions from project participants. In order to process this vast amount of material, some recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses were consulted (for example: Alexander, 2010; Day et al., 2009; Dyssegaard et al., 2013; Good, Wiley and Florez, 2009; Håkansson and Sundberg, 2012; Hattie, 2009; Mitchell, 2014; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009; Thornberg and Thelin, 2011).

Finally, each Agency member country was sent a request for abstracts of relevant literature, mainly in languages other than English. Twenty-two countries submitted information. This review incorporates some of the recent Agency member country developments, with the aim of stimulating a forward-looking approach towards raising the achievement of all learners.



## 4. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND RAISING ACHIEVEMENT

In today's changing world of education, schools in all societies are constantly expected to expand the range of outcomes that educational systems produce. At the same time, they are expected to provide all learners with equal opportunities to access a high-quality education. According to the PISA 2009 results:

*... successful school systems – those that perform above average and show below-average socio-economic inequalities – provide all students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, with similar opportunities to learn (OECD, 2010a, p. 13).*

School effectiveness and improvement research-based knowledge has proliferated through a wide range of well-documented projects, interventions and innovations around the world (Hopkins et al., 2014). School improvement is now viewed as a distinct approach to educational change. It focuses on raising the achievement of all learners (learner outcomes) and strengthening schools' capacity to cope with change (Ainscow et al., 2013).

Hopkins et al. (2014) identify five phases of school and system improvement:

- Phase 1 – understanding the school's organisational culture;
- Phase 2 – action research and research initiatives at the school level;
- Phase 3 – managing change and comprehensive approaches to school reform;
- Phase 4 – building capacity for pupil learning at the local level and the continuing emphasis on leadership;
- Phase 5 – moving towards systemic improvement.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) describe three previous ways of thinking about educational change: the First Way of innovation and inconsistency, the Second Way of markets and standardisation and the Third Way of performance and partnership, which aimed to combine the best of state support and market competition. The authors discuss the limitations of these ways and argue for the Fourth Way as the best way forward. This involves democracy and professionalism, rather than bureaucracy and market forces; trust and confidence among schools; and teachers sharing targets and collective responsibility for performance that will ultimately lift the system (Ainscow, 2015). As Hargreaves and Shirley note:

*It is a resilient social democracy that builds an inspiring and inclusive vision through courageous national and state or provincial leadership that draws teachers to the profession and grants them public status within it. It involves parents and the public as highly engaged partners, along with businesses that show corporate educational responsibility (2009, p. 107).*



More recently, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have argued for the ‘professional capital’ approach. This can transform the teaching profession and is essential for the most challenging educational circumstances. Professional capital comprises human, social and decisional capital. These forms of capital refer to the qualities of individuals (human capital), groups working hard in focused and committed ways towards improvement (social capital), while making professional judgements and decisions in complex situations (decisional capital). As the authors put it:

*Professional capital is a long term investment in highly performing educational systems and requires highly qualified teachers, committed, prepared, properly paid, networked with each other to teach all learners using all of their capabilities and experience (p. 3).*

In essence, building human, social and decisional capital simultaneously requires collaboration on a number of different levels, including teachers and other professionals working within, between and beyond schools (Chapman et al., 2016).

Despite the significant number of past attempts to reform whole systems, a theory of system change in education that results in an increase in pupil learning and achievement over time is still under debate (Hopkins et al., 2014). Harris (2011) notes that a successful change process needs to include a clear implementation strategy for new ideas which will focus on ‘capacity building’. Increasingly, a range of organisational and teaching approaches is seen as the norm. Schools build professional knowledge and expertise so that teachers can develop and adapt ways of learning suited to people’s natural diversity (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

#### **4.1 Organisational learning**

There is abundant research and theory focusing on the various strategies for school improvement (Harris et al., 2013). One of the most widely used approaches is organisational learning, which has been traditionally referred to as:

*... a collective and collaborative learning process for dynamic and creative decision making to respond to changes in both internal and external environment of the organisation (Argyris and Schön, 1996 in McCharen et al., 2011, p. 677).*

More specifically, organisational learning involves three sequential stages. These consist of a trusting and collaborative climate, a shared monitored mission, and taking initiatives and risks supported by appropriate professional development (Mulford, 2010). Considerable attention has been paid to enhancing schools’ organisational capacity, especially in schools where achievement gaps among diverse learner groups are most evident. ‘Organisational capacity’ refers to ‘the



collective power of an entire faculty to strengthen student performance throughout their school' (Newmann et al., 2000 in King and Bouchard, 2011, p. 654).

According to King and Bouchard (2011), learner achievement is affected most directly by the quality of instruction. This, in turn, is influenced by five key dimensions of school capacity:

1. The knowledge, skills and dispositions of individual teachers (professional competences in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and classroom management, and high expectations for pupil learning)
2. The school's professional community
3. Programme coherence (the extent to which learner and faculty programmes in a school are co-ordinated, directed at clear learning goals and sustained over time)
4. Technical resources (high-quality curricula, books and other instructional materials, laboratory equipment, computers and adequate workspace)
5. Effective principal leadership.

Another area of organisational effectiveness and change concerns the cultural aspects of organisational learning. Over the past three decades, researchers and educators have focused on school climate and cultural reform as an evidence-based school improvement strategy. Said strategy involves all stakeholders (learners, parents/carers and school professionals) in learning and working together to create better schools (Thapa et al., 2013). McCharen and colleagues (2011) note that organisational innovation is critically linked to the learning organisation's cultural aspects. In their review of a series of correlational studies, Thapa et al. (2013) identify five essential dimensions of school climate:

1. Safety (e.g. rules and norms, physical safety, social-emotional safety)
2. Relationships (e.g. respect for diversity, school connectedness/engagement, social support, leadership, and learners' race/ethnicity and their perceptions of school climate)
3. Teaching and learning (e.g. social, emotional, ethical and civic learning; service learning; support for academic learning; support for professional relationships; teachers' and learners' perceptions of school climate)
4. Institutional environment (e.g. physical surroundings, resources, supplies)
5. The school improvement process.

The results of the Thapa et al. (2013) review show that school climate is directly related to academic achievement. The review also provides evidence from the





literature which demonstrates that this is true for all levels of schooling. Louis (2010) also emphasises the organisation's culture by noting that:

*Experience matters, but organizations can't learn if they don't have a 'learning culture' that includes features such as a willingness to experiment or improvise, cooperative rather than competitive teams or subunits, and processes for reflection and turning consensus into action (p. 8).*

Along these lines, Blandford (2015) argues for a focused whole-school collaborative approach for school development which requires a cultural shift, so as to ensure that every learner is able to fulfil their potential. Waldron and McLeskey (2010) use the term 'Comprehensive School Reform' to describe the process of 're-culturing' schools to become more effective and inclusive. Key aspects of this reform include the development of a collaborative culture, the use of high-quality professional development to improve teacher practices, and strong leadership for school improvement activities from the principal and other school leaders.

This wider view of school improvement, which promotes cultural change in schools by challenging established beliefs and patterns of working, is firmly supported by the work of Ainscow and his colleagues (see Ainscow, 2015; Ainscow et al., 2012; Muijs et al., 2011). Their approach goes beyond the boundaries of the school. It argues for school improvement processes aimed at developing more equitable school systems, by linking the local school efforts with strategies for tackling inequalities and, ultimately, with national policies towards creating a fairer society (Ainscow et al., 2012).

#### **4.2 Levers for organisational change**

It is evident that contemporary patterns of school improvement require professionals to implement and manage multiple and complex changes (Earley, 2013; Hargreaves, Lieberman et al., 2014). The OoP literature review also acknowledges the complex and multi-layered nature of educational change. It notes that such change requires 'a debate on purpose and outcomes involving all stakeholders, including learners and families' (European Agency, 2013a, p. 22).

Hopkins et al. (2014) suggest three levers which can provide more powerful ways to drive real reform in systems:

1. The first is about strategy – it is important to understand how the factors that characterise high-performing educational systems can be combined in different ways and in different innovation clusters. This strategy must include four main drivers: personalised learning, professionalised teaching, networks and collaboration, and intelligent accountability (Hopkins, 2011).



2. The second is about learning – there is a need to identify a set of principles that should be present in any learning environment.
3. The third is about intelligent implementation – after the identification of the successful strategies, there needs to be precise action, reflection on the effort and refinement (Hopkins et al., 2014).

On a more practical level, it is important to consider three dimensions when trying to promote change in schools:

*First is the possible use of new or revised materials (i.e. curriculum materials), second is the possible use of new teaching approaches (i.e. teaching practices), and third is the possible alteration of beliefs (or understandings about the curriculum and learning practices) (Fullan, 2007 in Cerna, 2013, p. 22).*

A recent example of successful school improvement can be found in Sweden. For three years (2012–2014), the Swedish National Agency for Education collaborated with head teachers and teachers in ten low-achieving schools to create conditions to improve learner performance. The project involved targeted efforts in the areas of guidance and coaching for teachers, support for the head teachers, study guidance in the learners' mother tongue, communication and interaction with the learners' guardians, help with homework, and extended teaching hours (for learners). Some of the main findings that emerged from the evaluation of this project were:

- Tutoring and coaching are effective tools in school improvement efforts.
- Special initiatives designed to support the head teachers in the school development effort contribute to a quality, long-term approach.
- School improvement initiatives are successful when all or a large part of the school staff participate in joint development and training efforts.
- School development should be driven from a long-term perspective and on the basis of systematic quality work (Östlund, 2015).

The OoP literature review summarises the main factors that promote the change process in schools. These include:

- *the school culture and ethos;*
- *the leadership styles;*
- *the 'enquiry attitude' of the staff;*
- *the capacity to listen to learners' voices; and*
- *the mobilisation of support, first from within the school and then outside the school (European Agency, 2013a, p. 20).*



Regarding raising achievement in particular, the RA4AL project identified the following six themes as critical for improving the performance of all learners:

1. Collaborative policy and practice
2. Support for school and system leaders
3. Inclusive accountability
4. Personalisation through listening to learners
5. Professional development for inclusive education
6. Pedagogical approaches for all (European Agency, 2012a).

Overall, Fullan (2011) identifies some tensions between hindering factors ('wrong-drivers') and constructive factors that can really support change in schools. These complement the findings of Ainscow (2008) and Carrington and Robinson (2006). Table 1 summarises them for the purpose of this review.

**Table 1. Hindering and constructive factors affecting change in schools**

<b>Hindering factors</b>	<b>Constructive factors</b>
Accountability	Capacity building
Individual leadership	Promoting collaboration, teacher qualities and group solutions
Technology in itself	Pedagogy in ICT
Fragmented strategies	Integrated and systemic strategies
The 'solitary good school'	Engaging critical friends
External motivation	Intrinsic motivation
Focus only on learners' academic achievement	Focus on learners' quality of experience: presence, participation and achievement
Lack of common understanding	Development of common vocabulary and shared understanding

Equity and excellence in learning must also be supported by flexible policies. Such policies can fit particular school contexts and allow organisations to change in ways



that support teachers to improve their practices that impact upon pupil learning (King and Bouchard, 2011).

The OECD provides five policy recommendations which have been shown to be effective in supporting improvement, especially in low-performing disadvantaged schools:

1. *Strengthen and support school leadership ...*
2. *Stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning ...*
3. *Attract, support and retain high quality teachers ...*
4. *Ensure effective classroom learning strategies ...*
5. *Prioritise linking schools with parents and communities* (2012, pp. 11–12).

However, in order to tackle educational inequalities, it is important to note that school improvement policies might be necessary, but are insufficient for closing the attainment gap. The focus should always be on learners who are underachieving in both outstanding and underperforming schools (Clifton and Cook, 2012).



## 5. TEACHING APPROACHES

Raising the achievement of all learners is a daunting task. It requires teachers to use a range of techniques and approaches and flexibility in teaching, curriculum and assessment to provide options for different learners. The following sections provide an overview of pedagogies and teaching practices that have proved to be successful for raising the achievement of all learners in inclusive education.

### 5.1 Quality teaching for all

In order to ensure that all learners reach their full potential, education plans must focus primarily on teaching quality and learning outcomes (Hunt, 2015). Quality and effective teaching can be defined as the kind of teaching which leads to high learner achievement, using outcomes that matter to future success (Coe et al., 2014). The perspectives of achievement may be divided into two main kinds. The first type derives from a 'school effectiveness perspective'. It measures quality as learner performance and achievement on standardised national or international tests (Grosin, 2003 in Thornberg and Thelin, 2011). The other type (Williams, 2003), deriving from the 'school development perspective', defines quality as being when learners also develop:

- sustainable knowledge;
- knowledge used for a deeper understanding of the world
- actionable knowledge, which according to Argyris, 'is not only relevant to the world of practice, it is the knowledge that people use to create that world' (1993, p. 1);
- a willingness and desire to continue learning;
- critical thinking, collaborative skills, creativity, independence and problem-solving ability;
- a democratic attitude of mind.

All teaching-learning situations are in some sense always unique (Håkansson and Sundberg, 2012). Nevertheless, the synthesis of several research results indicates the basic underlying principles for and qualities of good or successful teaching, which remain stable over time:

- Visible, well-organised, planned and reflective pedagogic leadership
- Clear mandate for teachers and a professional pedagogic climate
- Teacher competence: rigorous subject knowledge and efficient use of this knowledge in relation to a deep understanding of the learners



- Safe, supportive and encouraging learning environment
- Search for evidence, founded on a context-based critical reflection.

(Alexander, 2010; Håkansson and Sundberg, 2012; Good, Wiley and Florez, 2009; Gustavsson, 2009; Saha and Dworkin, 2009).

Regarding teacher competence, subject knowledge is widely acknowledged as a central component of what teachers need to know. However, Hattie's meta-study (2009) shows that it has little effect on the quality of learner outcomes. Nonetheless, Hattie (ibid.) also stresses that expert teachers do differ in how they organise and use this content, i.e. by changing, combining and adding to the lessons according to learners' needs and their own teaching goals.

Alexander (2010) and Håkansson and Sundberg (2012) highlight the relational factors which emerge throughout all other aspects of teaching. Håkansson and Sundberg call this a 'general frame of reference' for the development of quality teaching. It consists of five dimensions:

1. A collective dimension: teachers and learners handle the learning tasks together
2. A mutual dimension: teachers and learners interact and listen to each other, share ideas and consider different views and opinions
3. A supportive dimension: the learners express ideas in a free sphere, without being afraid to give the 'wrong answer' or say that they do not understand, helping each other to reach a common understanding
4. A goal-oriented dimension: teachers plan, direct and steer classroom communication according to certain pedagogical goals
5. A cumulative dimension: teachers and learners build on their own and each other's ideas and link them together into coherent lines of thought and learning.

According to Håkansson and Sundberg (ibid.), it is fundamental for teachers to:

- have faith and trust the learners' ability to learn, not just by thought, but primarily through their actions and being;
- have the capability to lead/guide the learning process by creating functioning relations with learners within a varied repertoire of teaching;
- translate and adopt their subject knowledge to specific situations and contexts;
- use well-structured qualitative goals and challenging tasks and projects, just ahead of the learners' current understanding.



According to Coe et al. (2014), good quality teaching will likely involve six common components suggested by research, a combination of which are manifested at different times:

1. (Pedagogical) content knowledge (strong evidence of impact on learner outcomes)
2. Quality of instruction (strong evidence of impact on learner outcomes)
3. Classroom climate (moderate evidence of impact on learner outcomes)
4. Classroom management (moderate evidence of impact on learner outcomes)
5. Teacher beliefs (some evidence of impact on learner outcomes)
6. Professional behaviours (some evidence of impact on learner outcomes).

Reyes et al. (2012) particularly emphasise the classroom climate. They note that when this is characterised by warm, respectful, emotionally supportive relationships, learners perform better academically. This is partly because learners are more emotionally engaged in the learning process. Their findings suggest that academic success is contingent – to some extent – on the emotional components of learning and motivation. Similarly, Rowe et al. (2012) note that one of the key features of quality teaching is a calm, well-disciplined and orderly classroom environment that encourages a culture of aspiration and achievement for all learners.

## **5.2 Teaching strategies for diversity**

One of the most comprehensive works on effective teaching approaches is Hattie's meta-study (2009). It compares and analyses the findings of many previous studies focusing on teaching strategies and approaches. Based on this analysis, it identifies the following teaching approaches as the most effective for raising achievement:

- *Structured instruction/teaching*: sequences with clear goals, identifying critical aspects of the subject in focus, mentoring, follow-up on the learners' understanding, summaries, synthesis and repetition
- *Meta-cognitive strategies*: the methods of studying, learning, building on the principles of organising an assignment for self-learning, self-evaluation, support from a partner, repetition and memorising, formulating goals and planning of future learning
- *Formative feedback*: clarifying, sharing and understanding the goals and the expectations together (teacher-learner), creating situations which trigger 'evidence' of learning, what is learnt, feedback so that the learners 'move ahead' and making the learners become resources for each other



- *Peer learning*: small group interaction
- *Peer assessment*.

Some of the strategies mentioned previously have undergone further analysis in a recent synthesis of results by Almqvist, Malmqvist and Nilholm (2015). The researchers systematically compiled and analysed 38 meta-analyses of five different methods/teaching interventions, in the content areas of reading, writing and mathematics:

1. Peer tutoring
2. Co-operative learning
3. Direct instruction
4. Meta-cognitive strategies
5. Individual learning.

The results revealed that peer tutoring, direct instruction and meta-cognitive strategies have the greatest effects on goal achievement among learners in need of special support.

Furthermore, Mitchell (2014) identifies the following evidence-based strategies that have proved to be successful in raising achievement and participation:

- Co-operative group teaching
- Peer tutoring
- Parental involvement and support
- Cognitive strategy instruction
- Memory strategies
- Review and practice
- Behavioural approaches
- Formative assessment and feedback
- Optimal physical environment
- Classroom climate.

It is worth noting that, for learners in need of special support, there is currently a lack of evidence that individual and co-operative learning are prerequisites for promoting school achievement. Nevertheless, co-operative learning is seen as good for learners in general (Almqvist, Malmqvist and Nilholm, 2015). This was evident in the study by Pereira and Sanches (2013), where co-operative learning promoted





significant improvements in the learners' academic achievement and behaviour and relationships in class, as well as parents' interest in the education process.

Dyssegaard and Larsen (2013) systematically investigated the existing research on inclusion to identify inclusion strategies that have generated positive effects. This review specifically focused on intervention initiatives targeting learners with ADHD/ADHD-like behaviour/socio-emotional difficulties. After their analysis of 43 studies, they identified two successful inclusion strategies:

- Two-teacher arrangements: the presence of two teachers or teaching assistants in the class has a positive effect on all learners. The studies which were examined emphasised the importance of in-service training in collaborative teaching, which has to be defined and planned in advance.
- Peer tutoring: this method proved to be an effective strategy for including learners with SEN in mainstream education. It can also have a positive effect on all the learners in the class.

Dyssegaard and Larsen conclude that:

*... successful inclusion requires instruction/in-service training of teachers in intervention initiatives that target pupils with special needs, access to resource persons who can supervise and offer direct support during teaching and knowledge of evidence-based teaching methods and intervention initiatives that target special needs pupils (2013, p. 45).*

These conclusions are in line with other studies which have highlighted how support for struggling learners needs to be very carefully attuned, if it is to have any positive effect (Blatchford et al., 2012; European Agency, 2013a; Mikola, 2011; Sharples et al., 2015).

According to Husbands and Pearce (2012), effective pedagogies:

- build on learners' prior learning and experience;
- involve a range of techniques, including whole-class and structured group work, guided learning and individual activity;
- focus on developing higher order thinking and meta-cognition, using dialogue and questioning;
- embed assessment for learning;
- are inclusive and take into account the diverse needs of a range of learners, as well as matters of learner equity.

It should be highlighted that teachers need to be clear about these different approaches, taking into account the fact that different techniques are fit for



different purposes in shaping learning. While it is valuable to identify features, strategies and principles that enable ‘good teaching’, these in themselves are not sufficient to change practice (Rowe et al., 2012). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) specifically note that meta-analyses on teaching approaches – such as the ones presented previously – are of little value, unless teachers work with other professionals to sharpen meaning and determine how and when to use different strategies in their own context. The RA4AL synthesis report adds that: ‘further research is needed on effective strategies to support learning and the management of heterogeneous groups in practice’ (European Agency, 2012b, p. 5). It therefore becomes clear that the use of diverse teaching strategies that meet the needs of different learners is a necessity. This is especially true considering the growing diversity in today’s classrooms.

### **5.3 Assessment strategies**

Assessment practices are identified as key to reducing underachievement (Faubert, 2012). Muskin highlights that assessment practices:

*... must be in full and functional harmony with a system’s curriculum, teacher training and support, texts and materials, planning, budgeting and all other departments (2015, p. 3).*

It is now widely recognised that formative assessment – also referred to as ‘assessment for learning’ – and feedback are the best way to promote achievement (Hattie, 2009; Husbands and Pearce, 2012; Mitchell, 2014). Unlike summative assessment (‘assessment of learning’), which has been traditionally linked to standardised, high-stakes tests and accountability (Garner et al., 2012), formative assessment can involve learners, enabling them to take a more active part in their learning. It is usually carried out in collaboration with others (Higgins et al., 2014) and can have substantial positive impacts on learner achievement (Dwyer and Wiliam, 2011). Formative assessment puts the learner at the centre of the assessment process. It provides the basis for personalisation according to the learner’s interests and aptitudes.

Formative assessment can also be very powerful when it emphasises the process of developing and supporting the learners’ meta-cognition. This function of formative assessment is what Earl (2012) terms ‘assessment as learning’. Assessment as learning serves as an additional instructional tool (Muskin, 2015) when learners are encouraged during the assessment process to activate their meta-cognitive skills. They do so by becoming critical thinkers, making sense of information, relating it to prior knowledge and using it to construct new learning (Earl, 2012).



Looney (2011) stresses that formative assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and identifies the following characteristics:

- It includes self- and peer assessment.
- It provides effective feedback with careful use of questioning.
- It takes place in a classroom culture that encourages risk taking and learning from mistakes.

Similarly, Rowe et al. (2012) highlight the importance of continuous monitoring of learner progress. This, along with the contribution of learner assessment, can effectively target support, inform future planning and enhance learning outcomes. Hill (2010) goes beyond the classroom and school level. He argues for a more systemic approach to formative assessment as part of an overall accountability and instructional framework. A relevant framework has been developed in Estonia. According to the national standards there, the purpose of assessing learning outcomes is to provide important feedback, at both country and school level. This aims to promote school improvement (Kitsing, Boyle, Kukemelk and Mikk, 2016).

Another notable example of a systemic approach is the 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) programme in Norway, initiated by the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training. It was implemented in order to improve formative assessment practices in the classroom. Its key findings include:

- The importance of 'clear communication between governance levels and a high degree of trust between stakeholders'
- The need for 'a clear understanding of the programme goals'
- The role of 'learning networks between schools' to aid knowledge exchange and provide peer support during the implementation process
- The importance of 'innovative forms of capacity building' (Hopfenbeck et al., 2013, p. 9).

For a successful assessment framework, Faubert (2012) urges schools to establish guidelines that promote the combined use of summative and formative assessment. More specifically, he suggests the following assessment practices which have proven to be the most effective:

- Assessment followed by feedback
- Formative use of summative assessments
- Formative evaluation of teacher programmes (i.e. supporting teachers to use multiple sources of data in order to effectively assess the effectiveness of their teaching programmes)



- Construct definition and interpretation. Educators must pay more attention to the construct of assessment as a means of advancing equity in schools and classrooms (William, 2010 in Faubert, 2012, p. 9).

Regarding the assessment of learners with SEN, the OoP project specifically argues for assessment practices that are guided by inclusive principles:

*Inclusive assessment shifts the focus from assessment procedures that focus on diagnosis and resource allocation, often conducted outside the mainstream school, to on-going assessment that is conducted by class teachers to organise individual educational planning. Such assessment procedures allow schools and teachers to take responsibility for all their learners and to effectively address all their needs* (European Agency, 2013a, p. 46).

Similarly, appropriate assessment tools and procedures are required for learners from an immigrant background. The Agency (2009) specifically highlights the need for professionals to be able to consider bilingualism as well as multicultural aspects when using assessment tools and evaluating results. What becomes crucial in assessing all learners, including those with SEN and an immigrant background, is a holistic approach to assessment which focuses on the process of learning and development (ibid.).

Finally, Kefallinou and Donnelly (2016) identify the following issues as crucial in moving towards an improved inclusive assessment framework:

- The purposes of assessment need to be clear and aligned with educational goals and learning objectives.
- Learners should be put at the centre of the assessment process and teachers must put emphasis on formative assessment.
- A coherent assessment system should be fit for purpose and should be operated as a result of collaborative school-based planning.
- Inclusive principles should be incorporated into assessment and accountability frameworks.
- School leaders/teachers/other stakeholders should be involved/have ownership of evaluation and improvement processes.
- Teachers should have a clear understanding of assessment issues to support inclusive practice.



## 5.4 Curriculum development

The conventional academic and behavioural outcomes that were considered essential for effective schools are now out-dated. As the *Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission* notes:

*... basic competences must go hand in hand with other key competences and attitudes: creativity, entrepreneurship and sense of initiative, digital skills (including coding), foreign language competences, critical thinking including through e-literacy and media literacy, and skills reflecting growing sectors, such as the green economy (European Commission, 2015a, p. 3).*

As such, schools are now expected to develop learners' higher order thinking skills, problem-solving capacities, and the habits of collaboration and teamwork (Hargreaves, Lieberman et al., 2014). Furthermore, Lippman et al. outline the main critical skills that are most likely to increase the odds of success, which are applicable across sectors and diverse world regions:

*... social skills; communication; and higher-order thinking skills (including problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making); supported by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept (2015, p. 5).*

The authors suggest that systems should focus on developing these skills in order to prepare young people for success in the workforce.

The development of these competences requires extension of the curriculum by focusing more on wider skills, such as social/emotional competencies and creativity (Ianes, 2013; Novara and Passerini, 2015). Advanced skills in these areas can promote a co-operative and constructive classroom environment, enhance group interactions, facilitate the inclusion of learners with disabilities, and prevent inequality and episodes of bullying (Ianes, 2013). Lucas, Claxton and Spencer (2013) specifically mention that when teachers focus on developing creativity, it is more likely that learners will display the full range of their creative dispositions in a wide variety of contexts.

Hattie (2009) argues for focusing attention on the learning strategy by way of an integrated curriculum. In addition, McTighe and Wiggins (2012) propose the 'Understanding by Design framework'. It helps to focus curriculum and teaching on the development and deepening of learner understanding and transfer of learning. In this framework, an effective curriculum is planned backwards from long-term, desired results through a three-stage design process: desired results, evidence and learning plan. This planning process helps avoid the common problems of treating the textbook as the curriculum rather than a resource, and activity-oriented teaching without clear priorities and purposes (ibid.).



Furthermore, Faubert stresses that the curriculum should be common to all learners and set high expectations. He explicitly states that:

*... a common, authentic and integrated curriculum with clear, challenging goals and no dead-end courses should be promoted at the school and classroom levels (2012, p. 10).*

However, as Garner et al. (2012) note, there is currently a lack of coherence in the curriculum for learners with SEN across many national settings. Thus, the debate around the efforts to secure a truly 'inclusive' curriculum for learners with SEN continues. For example, Lähteenmäki's study (2013) from Finland examines the perceptions of learners with severe cerebral palsy. It reveals that the most important school subjects for them are those which provide skills and knowledge that they will need as young adults. These include interaction skills, reading and writing skills, IT skills, body management skills, independent movement with a wheelchair, and understanding of their rights and potential.

This example highlights the need for flexible curriculum development which is tailored to each learner's specific needs and supports the high achievement of all learners. An inclusive curriculum does not aim to reduce the knowledge that a learner has to acquire; instead, it involves adapting teaching methods and activities to facilitate learning and to move the learner towards higher levels of achievement (Flecha, 2015). As PISA 2009 found: 'In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better' (OECD, 2010a, p. 14).

Moreover, an inclusive and flexible curriculum provides more equitable opportunities for young people to develop and use the skills and abilities necessary to become an active part of the workforce. A notable example is the Scottish 'Curriculum for Excellence'. It aims to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they will need if they are to flourish in life, learning and work, now and in the future, and to appreciate their place in the world. This is further reinforced through Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy: Developing the Young Workforce. It encourages business and industry to work together with schools and young people, and vice versa, to establish pro-active and engaged relationships. These improve learner experiences and outcomes and benefit both young people and employers (Scottish Government, 2014).

Initiatives like this should therefore be seen as part of a wider system improvement which facilitates all learners' progression towards adulthood. Moreover, it safeguards against early school leaving, negative transitions and poor life chances (European Agency, 2016).



## 5.5 Use of ICT

The rapid development of new technology has created and continues to create new opportunities for raising achievement. A considerable amount of research suggests the use of digital tools and resources as powerful tools in teaching and learning (Higgins, Xiao and Katsipataki, 2012; Rowe et al., 2012; Rousseau and Angelucci, 2014). The continuing development in the availability of technology in schools and society as a whole also has the potential to facilitate and promote inclusive practice (European Agency, 2013b). UNESCO (2011) notes that the use of technology in education facilitates personalised learning, as it enables flexible curriculum development and assists learners with different needs to participate as equals in the learning experience. According to Fullan and Langworthy:

*... digital tools and resources enable the:*

- 1. discovery and mastery of new content knowledge;*
- 2. collaborative, connected learning;*
- 3. low-cost creation and iteration of new knowledge;*
- 4. use of new knowledge with authentic audiences for 'real' purposes; and*
- 5. enhancement of teachers' ability to put students in control of the learning process, accelerating learner autonomy (2014, p. 33).*

Although there is a general consensus that technology benefits the education process (OECD, 2010b), concerns have been raised about its effects on thinking and learning (Hattie and Yates, 2013). Fullan and Langworthy (2014) highlight previous research findings which suggest that technology use has a below-average impact on learning relative to other interventions. This might be because teachers are failing to find effective ways to use technology to support learning, considering the lack of understanding and competence involving ICT and new technologies generally, inadequate teacher training and the lack of incentives (European Agency, 2013b; OECD, 2010b).

Evidently, there is a need for a systemic approach to technology-based school innovations (OECD, 2010b). This should focus on the pedagogy of applying technology (Higgins, Xiao and Katsipataki, 2012) and teacher training (Mavrou, 2011). Fullan and Langworthy (2014) note that technology can promote deep learning when it is strategically integrated with the other core components of the new pedagogies. For example, Mavrou et al. (2010) examined computer-based collaborative learning in inclusive classrooms. They found that the computer emerged as the third party in collaborative activity, which provided various opportunities and motivations for interaction.



Furthermore, UNESCO IITE (2012) suggests ways through which digital technology can be used in schools to promote personalised learning. These include using ICTs:

- for assessment of learning;
- for personalised instruction, by selectively delivering digital content;
- to personalise the curriculum, by designing and presenting learning material that each learner needs in the classroom;
- to change classroom organisation, which reflects the shift of attention from the teacher to learners;
- to access digital learning content and to interact with other learners, parents and experts beyond the classroom.

Hattie (2009) suggests that technology is effectively used in classrooms when:

- there is a diversity of teaching strategies;
- there is pre-training in the use of computers as a teaching/learning tool;
- there are multiple learning opportunities;
- the learner is in control of learning;
- peer learning is optimised;
- feedback is optimised.

UNESCO also provides practical recommendations for the use of accessible ICT that facilitates personalised learning. These include:

- facilitating learners to 'self-accommodate by learning the computer features that best suit their needs';
- using accessible ICTs as an integrated part of schools' ICTs plans;
- fostering 'an inclusive and positive attitude towards the use of technology for learning';
- providing teacher training support (2011, p. 8).

Finally, the work of UNESCO IITE in co-operation with the Agency outlines a number of key messages for the further development of national ICT strategies and their successful implementation:

- *Increasing access to ICT infrastructure ...*
- *Promoting basic ICT literacy ...*





- 
- *Supporting international co-operation and practice exchange ...*
  - *Monitoring the implementation of policy and practice developments in this area* (Watkins, 2011, pp. 92–93).



## 6. ACTIVE LEARNERS

### 6.1 Increasing learner capacity

The previous section has reviewed different approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment that have proved to be successful in raising the achievement of all learners. However, if teachers are to successfully meet the learning challenges of all, a repertoire of practices is essential, but not sufficient. Teachers must also possess a deep understanding of how learning occurs and of the determinants that influence attainment (Swann et al., 2012).

Nuthall notes that learner experiences are constantly shaped by three worlds that exist in the classroom:

- *The public world that the teacher sees and manages – structured by the learning activities that the teacher designs*
- *The semiprivate world of on-going student relationships, where students establish and maintain their social role and status*
- *The private world of the child's own mind, where children's knowledge and beliefs change and grow (2007, p. 84).*

Thus, it becomes clear that in order to enhance learner outcomes, teachers need to monitor learning and respond accordingly. They may do so by also taking into account the power of learner relationships and status, as well as their differences in background knowledge (Nuthall, 2007).

According to Swann et al. (2012), both external forces (curriculum, assessment, organisation of learning, learning relationships) and internal forces (intellectual, affective and social) affect learning capacity. Teachers should therefore be empowered to increase learner capacity through a sophisticated understanding of these factors. In practice, this might include extending freedom to learn and building a creative consensus on transformative pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and relationships (ibid.).

Hattie's meta-study (2009) has identified more specific influences related to learning and achievement. These include: the quality and quantity of instruction, disposition, class environment, level of challenge, peer tutoring, parental involvement, cognitive ability and home factors. Finally, feedback features as one of the most critical influences on pupil learning (Hattie, 2009; Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

In particular, as Hattie and Timperley (2007) note, the type of feedback and the way it is given can be differentially effective. The authors present a model that identifies four levels of feedback (i.e. about the task, about the processing of the task, about



self-regulation, and about the self as a person), as well as the circumstances that make it effective. Said circumstances include the timing of feedback and the effects of positive and negative feedback. They conclude that feedback has to be combined with effective instruction, noting that ‘teachers need to seek and learn from feedback (such as from students’ responses to tests) as much as do students’ (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p. 104).

Higgins, Kokotsaki and Coe (2012) analysed many of the strategies generally used to improve learning for all. These authors provide information on the impact, strength of evidence and costs of different strategies. They found that effective feedback, meta-cognition and self-regulation strategies, peer-assisted learning and early intervention were among the most effective. Farrington et al. (2012) also add that learners’ knowledge on how and when to use learning strategies is associated with higher overall learning and better academic success.

Research has also identified a series of effects on achievement related to learner grouping. The INCLUD-ED project (2006–2011) compared different types of learner grouping (mixture, streaming and inclusion). It found that co-existence in heterogeneous inclusion classrooms where co-operative and dialogic learning take place can improve academic achievement (Flecha, 2015). It is important to note that ability grouping or different kinds of organisational differentiation do not provide the benefits that teachers intuitively imagine (INCLUD-ED, 2012; Persson, 2012). Rather they increase the differences between learners (Dubois-Shaik and Dupriez, 2013). Swann et al. (2012) add that ability grouping practices perpetuate social class inequalities. As they note:

*To believe in fixed ability is to believe in fixed futures and the limited power of teachers – to believe in the transformability of learning capacity is to embrace the following convictions: human development is not predictable, children’s futures are unknowable, education has the power to enhance the lives of all (ibid., p. 127).*

Therefore, what becomes crucial is the creation of a challenging environment which stimulates learner thinking (Swann et al., 2012). Mikola (2011) highlights the need for school pedagogy to be adapted to teaching in heterogeneous groups. Likewise, Faubert (2012) underlines the need for empirical evidence of how or under what conditions learner grouping strategies can increase learner capacity.

## **6.2 Personalised learning**

When it comes to learning and achievement, there is a growing consensus that the most effective way of increasing attainment is by helping learners to become independent, reflective and involved in their own learning (Hattie, 2009). Recently, educational research is focusing more on pedagogical approaches that go beyond



the teacher-led practices of 'differentiation' or 'individualisation' towards more learner-centred, personalised classroom practice (Sebba, 2010). Personalised learning is an on-going process which enables 'deep learning' (Brown et al., 2007). It sets high expectations for progress, participation and success for all learners equally, including those who have been identified as having SEN (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; UNESCO, 2011).

Differentiation and individualisation involve the teacher providing instruction and accommodating the learning needs of a group of learners or individual learners, respectively. In contrast, personalisation entails the learners driving their own learning, being responsible for connecting learning with their own interests and actively participating in the design of their own learning (Bray and McClaskey, 2014).

At this point, it is useful to note that this report uses the term 'learner' instead of 'student'. This is because 'learner' implies a certain level of responsibility for learning on behalf of the individual (Bray and McClaskey, 2014). It is therefore more in line with the concept of personalisation.

Hargreaves (2004) has set the general context and outlined the gateways to personalising teaching and learning:

- Learning to learn and the new technologies
- Curriculum and advice/guidance
- Workforce development and mentoring/coaching
- Organisation and design of the school and leadership from teachers and leaders of all levels.

Rowe et al. (2012), after examining a number of reports that emphasise personalisation, highlight the importance of teachers adapting approaches and resources to each individual learner's needs. The investigation by Brown et al. (2007) shows that the schools which were developing strong and cohesive personalised learning used the following approaches: aspects of assessment for learning in particular; learners taking more responsibility for their own learning; 'genuine' learner voice; strong links with the community; and curricular flexibility.

Finally, Hollenweger, Pantić and Florian (2015) view personalisation as a means to ensure learners' right to education (access), their rights in education (learning and participation) and their rights in society (achievement). As they put it:

*Personalising education means that the talents, ambitions and interests of students are taken into account and used as tools in the creation of a learning community (p. 54).*



As such, education professionals who seek to promote access, participation, learning and achievement for all need to value learner diversity and be involved in practices that protect the right to education of each child or young person (Hollenweger, Pantić and Florian, 2015).

### **6.3 Learner voice and participation**

Creating learner-centred classrooms, which value and respect diversity, involves promoting participation and gaining learners' input about their school life in general and the learning process in particular. Discourses related to the imperative of listening to learner voices have received much attention in the field of school improvement. However, most learner voice activities currently in schools consist of less intensive involvement, in the forms of expression, consultation and some participation (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). Although some schools consider they are listening to the voices of children and young people, in many cases, they are doing so tokenistically (Robinson and Taylor, 2007).

Robinson and Taylor (2007) outline four underpinning values of learner voice work, each potentially significant in enabling school improvement through enhancing social justice:

- 1. A conception of communication as dialogue.*
- 2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity.*
- 3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.*
- 4. The possibility for change and transformation (p. 8).*

It is therefore important that researchers and service providers not only recognise the rights of learners – including those with learning disabilities – to have a 'voice', but also actively work towards eliciting views from all (Lewis and Porter, 2004). Learners have a right to express their views on how well their needs are being met, as well as a clear entitlement to influence the services that affect them (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007). Feedback from learners adds to the school's development plan and enables learners to become more involved and engaged in their learning experience (ibid., p. 3).

Jorgensen and Lambert (2012) also highlight the importance of learners' full membership, participation and learning of the general education curriculum which should be led by the general education teacher. Along those lines, Tetler et al. (2010) suggest that involving learners in teaching planning and evaluation can facilitate the development of autonomy and engagement in the learning process.



They also note that:

*It requires creativity, perseverance and empathy to succeed in grasping the students' will to learn and in transforming it to a sustainable practice (p. 9).*

Miller et al. (2005) specifically point out that learner voice is rarely sought about placement decisions. Learner preference is considered to be an influential variable in performance. Neglecting learners' voices may lead to their disenchantment, discouragement and reluctance to perform (Miller & Fritz, 2000 in Miller et al., 2005). Thus, in the case of resource allocation and services, the promotion of educational advocacy becomes crucial. Duquette et al. (2011) examined the educational advocacy experiences of parents of adolescents and young adults identified as having a learning disability through the lens of four dimensions of advocacy. Said dimensions, proposed by Alper et al. (1995), are self-advocacy, social support advocacy, interpersonal advocacy and legal advocacy. The authors highlight the potential of interpersonal advocacy. It occurs most frequently through formal and informal communication between family members, professionals, or others on behalf of the child or young person with disabilities. Based on their findings, the authors argue that interpersonal advocacy can be seen as a 'starting point for addressing the inequities of educational resource allocation on an individual basis' (Duquette et al., 2011, p. 125).

Evidently, there is a need to further explore the concept and the possibilities of learner voice and participation through on-going research and practice. As the European Union Education Ministers note:

*We must build on children's and young people's sense of initiative and the positive contribution they can make through participation, while reaffirming the common fundamental values on which our democracies are based (European Commission, 2015b, p. 2).*



## 7. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Schools cannot change and improve without good leaders. The literature on inclusive education underlines leadership's crucial role in fostering innovation and promoting inclusive change (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Mac Ruairc et al., 2013). What is more, research evidence increasingly shows that leadership practices are both directly and indirectly connected with learners' outcomes (Mac Ruairc et al., 2013; Silva and Lima, 2011). Harris notes that:

*Leading system reform is not about mandating, driving or demanding better performance, it is about creating the conditions where professional knowledge and skills are enhanced, where effective leadership exists at all levels and, most importantly, where the success of every child in every setting is the main driver and ultimate goal of system improvement (2012, pp. 400–401).*

Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris (2014) discuss the process of 'uplifting leadership'. They identify the following factors that can promote success:

- Dreaming with determination (i.e. identifying a desired destination and determining how to reach it)
- Using creativity and counterflow
- Promoting collaboration with competition
- Pushing and pulling the school teams
- Measuring with meaning (i.e. using meaningful data to manage and monitor progress)
- Growing sustainable success by investing in the long term.

International research has identified two types of successful leadership: 'transformational leadership' and 'instructional leadership' (Day and Leithwood, 2007; Robinson, 2007a). The former assumes a leadership that makes changes. The latter focuses on improving classroom practices by developing a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for learners (Robinson et al., 2008). Instructional leadership emphasises the creation of such a supportive, encouraging work environment. This can enhance the development of teaching practices that are thought to improve academic performance (Hansen and Lárusdóttir, 2015).

Robinson's (2007b) synthesis of international research on head teachers who influence school results concluded that instructional leadership has a major impact on learner achievement. This is because it focuses on the quality of teachers' instructions/teaching. The study identified five dimensions of instructional leadership.



Leaders:

- formulate goals and show high expectations of teachers;
- allocate resources related to pedagogical purposes;
- plan, co-ordinate and evaluate teaching/instruction and the curriculum/plans;
- actively support and participate in teachers' learning and development;
- ensure a supportive, well-ordered environment.

A more recent study by Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) identified eight dimensions of leadership practices and activities which are linked to learner outcomes:

- *Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development*
- *Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum*
- *Establishing goals and expectations*
- *Strategic resourcing*
- *Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment*
- *Creating educationally powerful connections*
- *Engaging in constructive problem talk*
- *Developing and using smart tools* (2009, p. 39).

Overall, current knowledge about successful leaders states that effective leaders:

- take responsibility for the staff's development;
- direct the school towards agreed visions and goals;
- develop teaching/instruction through leadership in relation to the main focus of the school, namely fostering pupils' learning;
- influence the teachers' way of work through 'closeness' and interaction with the teachers;
- work with cultural changes and structural changes within the school (Day and Leithwood, 2007).

### **7.1 Distributed leadership**

Traditional theories about school leaders portray leadership in terms of a single individual who supervises and evaluates teachers and school staff (Shepherd and Hasazi, 2007). Contemporary views about leadership have modified these





conceptions and identified a series of limitations embedded in the old, managerial approach.

The new approach goes beyond traditional leadership that focuses on top-down hierarchical styles. In particular, leadership does not only refer to the head teacher. It extends to the role of other teacher leaders (Liasidou and Svensson, 2014) and, in general, to any other staff member who occupies a leading role within the institution. Such actors are important because they act as ‘enforcers’ or ‘drivers’ of the change process and multiply the head teacher’s actions.

Distributed leadership involves firstly the devolution of responsibilities to middle management teams that are able to support and manage the transfer of knowledge and skills when necessary. Secondly, it enables all staff to take responsibility by promoting flexibility and sharing practice. Hargreaves and Shirley cite distributed leadership as an important element of what they call ‘sustainable leadership’, which is underpinned by the following principles:

1. Depth – ‘developing student learning that is challenging and relevant’
2. Breadth – the above ‘purpose and its achievement are a shared and distributed responsibility, not an heroic exception or an isolated indulgence’
3. Endurance – ‘over time so that improvement continues across reforms and beyond particular governments’ and certain leaders
4. Justice – ‘attending to all students’ learning and achievement ... and promoting cooperation rather than ruthless competition among stronger schools and their weaker neighbors’
5. Resourcefulness – ‘using financial resources and human energy at a pace that people can manage, rather than wastefully burning them out’
6. Conservation – ‘connecting future visions to past traditions in narratives of commitment and hope’
7. Diversity – ‘of curriculum, pedagogy, and team contributions in organizations and networks where ideas are cross-pollinated instead of being cloned’ (2009, pp. 97–98).

This kind of leadership can be developed by using teams of head teachers who have demonstrated success and work with a district/school over time to allow a gradual release of responsibility (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

Research on school improvement highlights the positive relationship between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and improved learner outcomes and change in schools (Day et al., 2009; Harris, 2009). Harris (2008) describes this as the form of leadership required for future organisations and



institutions, in which there are leaders rather than bosses. She also states that this form of leadership should not be used as a tool to meet the targets of an accountability agenda or a standards agenda, but to improve learning, both at the level of school staff and learners. Finally, she identifies the requirements for future leaders who should be able to respond to the demands of the context of which they are an integral part. They must focus on issues such as interdependence, participation and relationships, rather than on highly specialised competencies and abilities.

## 7.2 Inclusive leadership

The school leaders' role is fundamental in promoting ways of working and thinking that are in line with the principles of inclusion, such as setting strong goals and holding high expectations of learners (Portela, 2013). Schools with 'inclusive cultures' are likely to be characterised by the presence of leaders who are committed to inclusive values and encourage a range of individuals to participate in leadership functions (Dyson, Howes and Roberts, 2002). According to Dorczak, school leaders' main role is:

*... to release and develop the talents of all teachers or other members of staff as well [as] recognising and activating the potential of all students that are [the] main subject and basic value in school work (2013, p. 55).*

The work across 22 countries in the OECD's 'Improving School Leadership' activity showed that effective leadership is fundamental to improving both efficiency and equity of schooling. In this activity, there were also arrangements for co-operation between schools and school leaders. Four so-called 'main policy levers' were identified:

- (Re)define school leadership responsibilities
- Distribute school leadership
- Develop skills for effective school leadership
- Make school leadership an attractive profession (Pont et al., 2008).

Pont and Hopkins (2008) examined the actual practices in which school leaders were collaborating and working together with other schools in five different countries. The analysis revealed the benefits: leadership capacity building, rationalisation of resources, improved co-operation, a greater distribution of leadership within schools and improved school outcomes.

Similarly, Shepherd and Hasazi (2007) identified several factors that can support school leaders in the process of developing inclusion:

- Develop school cultures that include all learners.



- Contribute to a shared vision and culture supporting inclusion.
- Ensure that inclusive policies are implemented and that the school structure reflects the underlying commitment to inclusion.
- Promote effective instructional practices, by supporting teachers to build their teaching strategies and thus improve their instructional methods.
- Create professional learning communities.
- Increase parents' participation in school activities and promote the school's participation in the local community's activities.
- Embrace a social justice framework, understand the moral dimension of their role and do their best to ensure that all learners – including those with disabilities – can learn together with others.

Furthermore, Ferguson (2008) provides a synthesis of the changes that occur when schools pursue beliefs and practices that embrace and include diversity and difference of all kinds. These are:

- changing the focus from teaching to learning;
- making the curriculum more engaging and personalising learning;
- creating communities of learners who support and share in each other's learning;
- moving from offering services to providing support.

It can be easily inferred that, in order to promote inclusive change, leaders need to be flexible. Angelides (2011) studied the forms of leadership that promote inclusive education and how these manifest in head teachers' practices, activities and behaviours. By studying four Cypriot schools, it became apparent that the leadership patterns that support inclusion are not static. Leaders try to understand the local context and then develop their own strategies. They also support learning in informal learning environments and take learners' voices into consideration.

Finally, Precey and Mazurkiewicz suggest that leadership action for inclusive education should be built around five elements:

1. Adequate actions that are coherent with the context (i.e. constant reflection, regular analysis of trends, needs and expectations; on-going adaptations of objectives, priorities, tasks and actions)
2. Focus on learning as a 'visible priority'
3. Participation of all colleagues (staff, learners and parents/carers) in the deliberation and decision-making process



- 
4. Diversity; ‘respecting autonomy and differences’ and dealing effectively with challenging inequity
  5. Stewardship (adopting ‘an appropriate serving attitude’ towards everyone) (2013, p. 116).



## 8. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

In recent years, traditional individualistic conceptions of learning have been increasingly challenged, and attention has focused more on community-centred approaches to learning (Hakkarainen, 2010). This trend in human learning and cognition emphasises participation, joint meaning-making, discourse and dialogue (Moen et al., 2012). It is characterised by collaboration, creative processes and the use of new technology (Paavola et al., 2012).

According to Hakkarainen (2010), collaborative learning has become a popular focus of educational research as a result of major theoretical-methodological shifts:

- From teacher-centred towards more learner-centred approaches
- From individually-oriented towards socially-oriented notions of constructive processes
- From laboratory studies towards investigations of learning processes taking place in schools and classrooms as well as in real-world contexts.

Paavola et al. (2004) analyse three influential models concerning learning and innovative inquiry, which appear to represent essential aspects of the knowledge creation process. These are the knowledge building model by Bereiter (2002), the knowledge creation model by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and the expansive learning model by Engeström (1987). Based on their analysis, Paavola et al. conclude that these three models of innovative knowledge communities share a common characteristic: they depict innovative processes as fundamentally social, happening within communities. They further explain that in all models, the agent of knowledge creation is not an isolated individual, but is either an individual embedded in a community or the community itself. As such, they suggest focusing on the overall functioning of schools in relation to the practices in knowledge-creating organisations, rather than studying isolated teachers and classrooms.

Muijs et al. agree with this notion, stressing that:

*Organisations are most likely to be effective learners where they form communities of practice in networks or other collaborative arrangements, and are engaged in a process of social learning that occurs when actors who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations (2010, p. 9).*

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collaborative learning in 'a shared domain of human endeavour' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2011, p. 1). From this perspective, the school is seen as part of a broader learning system.



The communities of practice formed within the school are characterised by three basic elements:

- A shared domain of interest
- Joint activities and discussions in a community
- A common practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2011).

Watkins' review (2005) further supports the development of learning communities as a key feature of 21<sup>st</sup>-century schools. A particularly important feature of learning communities is the knowledge (both individual and shared) which is seen to be the product of social processes, as well as the connectedness of outcomes – social, moral, behavioural, intellectual and performance. As the author puts it: 'in learning communities, social relations and knowledge-creation meet' (p. 48).

### **8.1 Professional learning communities**

Recently, many school improvement efforts have particularly focused on establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in order to create conditions of change. According to Bolam and colleagues (2005), PLCs may have different interpretations in different contexts, and no universal definition exists. McLaughlin and Talbert use the term 'school-based teacher learning community' and define it as:

*... a professional community where teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes (2006, p. 4).*

Fullan adds school leaders into that definition and notes that:

*PLCs involve developing communities of learners in which teachers and school leaders work together to improve the learning conditions and results of students in given schools (2007, p. 30).*

This review adopts a broader definition of the term. It refers to collaborations of education stakeholders around clusters of schools involving school and community personnel, together with researchers, local area leaders and policy-makers (European Agency, 2015). In these communities, the education professionals are committed to working actively in teams and sharing their practice around the curriculum, instruction and assessment in order to reach the same goal: to improve the learning of every learner and raise their achievement (Humada-Ludeke, 2013).



Bolam and colleagues (2005) suggest that effective PLCs exhibit eight key characteristics:

- Shared values and vision
- Collective responsibility for pupils' learning
- Collaboration focused on learning
- Individual and collective professional learning
- Reflective professional enquiry
- Openness, networks and partnerships
- Inclusive membership
- Mutual trust, respect and support.

Improving schools through the formation of PLCs involves enhancing the school professionals' capability to provide the kinds of classroom experiences needed to improve all pupils' learning and achievement. As such, PLCs are closely linked with the concept of capacity building, and specifically collective professional capacity, which is an important and powerful contributor to better system performance (Bolívar Botía, 2014; Harris, 2012). Harris states that: 'Without purposeful, focused and sustained capacity building, evidence shows that implementation will be superficial at worst, and uneven at best' (2012, p. 398).

In their review on the impact of PLCs on teaching practices and pupil learning, Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008) summarise the findings from across the reviewed literature and conclude that:

- Participation in learning communities impacts upon teaching practice, as teachers become more learner-centred.
- Teaching culture is improved because learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on pupil learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning.
- When teachers participate in a learning community, learners also benefit, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time.

Although Harris and Jones (2010) firmly support PLCs, they also stress the difficulties in building and sustaining them. They note that improvements might be evident in the school culture, but that this does not always result in raised learner achievement. As such, it is crucial that PLCs are supported by strong leaders, who take ownership of building teacher capacity, assume responsibility for learner success (Humada-Ludeke, 2013) and establish a safe environment for teachers to improve their practice (Harris and Jones, 2010).



## **8.2 Community partnerships**

Learner achievement is influenced by the interaction learners have with all the social agents involved in their education. A considerable body of literature has highlighted the importance of community involvement in the school change process (Flecha, 2015). By community involvement, this review means the involvement of agents that are situated beyond a single school's boundaries, i.e. other schools, families, universities, community agencies (e.g. health professionals), community members (e.g. local employers) or even schools in different countries. These different types of community involvement are discussed below.

### **8.2.1 School networks**

Internationally, school networks are emerging as an increasingly common organisational form and a unique method for teachers' professional development and school improvement (Kubiak and Bertram, 2010). Harris and Jones (2012) refer to school networks as a model of school alliances, where teaching schools form partnerships and engage in a process of collaborative professional learning and enquiry, in order to inform their research and development work and improve professional practice. They also note that creating PLCs within and between schools enhances professional learning. Muijs et al. (2010) argue that school networks can be considered as learning communities when they share the goal of knowledge creation and allow openness and collaboration. Some of the characteristics of such networks include joint continuous professional development, regular contact between staff from all levels and across schools, and equal relationships.

Jackson and Temperley (2007) also firmly support the idea of networked learning which takes place beyond schools. They argue that networking activities encourage schools to take a fresh look at their understanding of and approaches to lesson and learning design. Educators gain first-hand practical experience of a broader range of learning environments and enhance their understanding and use of externally generated programmes and strategies. Finally, the authors note that through the process of collaborative inquiry, activity can change teachers' views of their learners and their behaviour.

An illustrative example of networks in action can be found in the work of Ainscow et al. (2012). They have been committed to creating an 'equity research network', where school practitioners, university researchers and learners work in partnership. The collaborating schools are situated in disadvantaged areas and, through the networking activities, are becoming involved in sharing practice and promoting equitable school improvement.





However, several researchers note that even though network-based strategies are increasingly used for school development, there is scant evidence of a correlation with increased learner achievement (Berkemeyer et al., 2015; Muijs et al., 2010). In particular, Muijs et al. present strong evidence in the literature which shows that networking is an effective way of widening opportunities and helping to address the needs of vulnerable groups of learners. Nevertheless, they also note that the evidence regarding effectiveness in raising achievement is modest to weak. They specifically point out that:

*Where improvements in pupil performance have been seen, this is often where more effective schools have paired with less effective schools to help them to improve, where leadership has been strong and supportive of networking, and where the number of schools involved has been limited (2010, p. 24).*

Therefore, it can be inferred that school partnerships should focus more on raising learner achievement. A recent successful example comes from Scotland, where teachers and school leaders worked in collaboration with like-minded professionals in the School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP). It started in 2013 and focused on eight partnership projects, involving over 50 schools across 14 school districts in Scotland. All had the common feature of tackling inequality in different ways. The evidence indicated that, overall, the initiative had increased teachers' knowledge, confidence and skills to challenge inequity and had a positive impact on learners' aspirations and achievement. This example confirms the value of school-to-school networking and cross-authority partnership work as key levers of innovation and system improvement (Chapman et al., 2015, 2016).

### **8.2.2 Home-school collaboration**

In promoting learner achievement, the role of families, family-school relations and parental involvement has been recognised as significant (Hattie, 2009; Hill and Tyson, 2009; Pameijer and De Vries, 2013). Home-school collaboration involves families and schools working together to promote learners' academic and social development (Cox, 2005).

The INCLUD-ED project (2012) has defined five types of family and community participation according to level and area of involvement: Informative, Consultative, Decisive, Evaluative and Educative. The latter three imply a greater degree of participation. These are most likely to have a positive impact on pupils' learning and the best guarantee of school success for all (Flecha, 2015). Epstein (in Jeynes, 2012) provides a more specific typology of parental involvement, which includes:

- Parenting (providing housing, health, nutrition, safety; parenting skills in parent-child interactions; home conditions to support study; information to help schools know the child)



- Communicating (school-home/home-school communication)
- Volunteering in school (help in classrooms/events)
- Teaching at home (help with homework, help with educational choices/options)
- Decision-making (members of PTAs/governors)
- Collaborating with the community (contributions to school).

A vast amount of literature documents the benefits of family participation to pupil learning. According to the INCLUD-ED report, this involvement promotes cultural and educational interactions with learners that can promote their success (Flecha, 2015). Results from several studies demonstrate a significant relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. This is true for primary and secondary school learners, as well as learners from minority backgrounds (Jeynes, 2012). For example, Hill and Tyson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of the existing research on parental involvement in secondary schools to examine whether and which types of parental involvement are related to achievement. Across 50 studies, they found that learner achievement is positively associated with parental involvement that creates an understanding about academic performance, communicates expectations about involvement and provides strategies that learners can effectively use. Homework assistance and supervising or checking homework was the only type of parental involvement not consistently related to achievement.

According to Cugmas, Čagran and Levart (2010), parental involvement has to be studied in relation to gender, school success and parental education level. In Borgonovi and Montt's study (2012), some forms of parental involvement were more strongly related to cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes than others. These include reading to children when they are young, engaging in discussions that promote critical thinking and setting a good example. Given the inequalities that were found in parental involvement across countries, the authors suggest that increasing parental involvement may result in better cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes among learners, which may help to reduce performance differences across socio-economic groups. Flecha (2015) also stresses the importance of community participation for learners from minority cultures, as it contributes to greater co-ordination between home and school activities. Similarly, the Agency (2010) notes that involving parents at every level of planning and developing services for their children with SEN is the best way of creating cost-effective, family-focused and responsive early childhood intervention services.



Staples and Diliberto, in their review of studies comparing districts' efforts to promote constructive family/school relationships, conclude that:

*The fundamentals of parent involvement needed for successful parent-teacher collaboration within a school environment include (a) building parent rapport, (b) developing a communication system with a maintenance plan, and (c) creating additional special event opportunities for parent involvement (2010, p. 60).*

Hedeen et al., after reviewing recent research, provide the following ways to encourage meaningful family engagement in education:

- 1. Any stakeholder may initiate a deeper partnership between families and schools, but all involved must work to sustain it ...*
- 2. Every school community must define parent/school engagement locally, recognizing that no two communities are identical ...*
- 3. Specific training in communication skills and collaborative approaches should be a priority for teachers, administrators, and parents ...*
- 4. Schools, school districts, PTAs, and others should create policies, structures, and events to support family/school engagement, including informal opportunities for interaction of all stakeholders ...*
- 5. Families and schools should recognize the occasional need for outside assistance, from resources or individuals beyond the immediate stakeholders ...*
- 6. Schools and parents should consider how technology can support their relationships (2011, p. 7).*

Finally, Ferguson notes that when schools pursue beliefs and practices that embrace and include diversity and difference of all kinds, there tends to be a broader view. Said view reflects a shift from 'parent involvement' to 'family-school linkages' that involve a 'mutuality of interaction and collaboration that commits both home and school to each other' (2008, p. 117). An example can be found in the 'Achievement for All' programme (UK). It provides targeted support and resources to teachers in order to strengthen their linkages with the parents of learners with disabilities. This support includes equipping teachers with the core skills necessary to conduct 'structured conversations' with parents/carers. The ultimate goal is to increase engagement and to create a wider school culture of mutual listening (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009).

### **8.2.3 School-university partnerships**

Recent research stresses the importance of close and positive partnerships between schools and universities which can support pupil learning and achievement.



The nature of partnerships between universities and schools varies widely (McMahon et al., 2015). They can focus on the areas of: initial teacher education (ITE), continuing professional development (CPD), consultancy, collaborative research and widening the participation of under-represented groups (Handscomb et al., 2014).

Regarding ITE and CPD, Allen et al. (2014) report multiple benefits of a close and successful partnership between schools and universities, including the provision of fresh teaching ideas, enhanced CPD opportunities, extra capacity, financial benefits and recruitment (the possibility of employing the trainee upon qualification).

Echeita stresses that:

*Traditionally, the ITE partnership with 'practice schools' tends to be rather superficial, with a clear difference in the knowledge status within the discourse in schools and universities ... Therefore, the challenge is to build meaningful joint work among universities and schools (particularly through school leaders), in addition to a clear conceptual framework to link theoretical and practical knowledge (2014, p. 64).*

Collaboration between schools and universities for the purpose of widening participation involves increasing access to learning. It also entails providing opportunities for success and progression to a wider cross-section of the population, particularly focusing on learners who are underachieving. Handscomb et al. (2014) highlight that widening participation requires reciprocal action which is sustained over time and includes partnership with the wider community.

An example of widening access and participation comes from Greece. There, a university project provided the background conditions for 31 Roma learners with disabilities to be included in local mainstream schools. Researchers from the university, teachers and parents/carers worked together to design and implement interventions. The interventions focused on the learners' language and literacy skills, mathematical skills, social interaction and mobility skills. This collaborative activity benefited all agents involved. It raised awareness of the processes required to include the particular group of learners in mainstream settings (Karagianni and Chalaza, 2015).

Borthwick et al. (2003) studied the perceptions of 34 participants (principals, assistant principals, teachers and university partnership co-ordinators) from ten school-university partnerships. The study identified five elements for successful partnerships and school improvement:

1. Being goal-oriented, with a short-term focus
2. Having persistence/existence (survival of the partnership)



3. Being dynamic and adaptable
4. Stressing important interactions (communication, hard work and attention to group dynamics)
5. Using action planning to develop operational strategies and steps for solving problems and understanding each partner's corporate/institutional structure.

Handscomb et al. highlight the power and control issues which are dominant in school-university partnership dynamics. They suggest breaking from traditional roles and relationships in order to achieve effective collaboration. They specifically stress that:

*Successful partnerships are tenaciously resilient in an ever changing policy and system environment. They require commitment which is regularly rededicated, a purpose which is often reaffirmed, and an identity and dynamic which are continually replenished. Partnerships depend on the adherence and obligation of their members; they thrive on trust and the continuing housekeeping attention that partners invest in them (2014, p. 32).*

Finally, Avalos (2011), in a review of studies of teacher professional development over ten years, also stresses the need to enhance partnership experiences between universities and teachers. This is in order to modify the traditional separation between academia and the professions.

### **8.2.4 International networks**

In today's globalised society, the development of international networks is increasingly considered a powerful way of enabling the transfer of educational knowledge and practice. It can facilitate school development efforts in various educational contexts.

An example of international networking is the collaborative action research project by Messiou et al. (2015), which involved eight secondary schools in three European countries and four universities. Each team experimented with ways of collecting and engaging with learners' views in order to foster the development of more inclusive classroom practices. Through processes of networking with the other partner schools, they shared their experiences and findings. This project illustrates how the networking activity provided rich opportunities for learning, as practitioners reflected on similarities and differences between the various contexts.

Miles (2015) presents an international model of inclusive networking. It has emerged through studying the case of the Enabling Education Network (EENET). This global network supports and promotes the inclusion of marginalised groups in education worldwide. In this model, knowledge is created by sharing information and knowledge between contexts, using reflection, documentation and analysis,



balancing insider and outsider knowledge and perspectives, and developing appropriate responses at community level. Based on her longitudinal research, Miles concludes that international networking can contribute to the creation of more contextualised understandings of inclusion.

Another notable example of international networking is the 'International Teacher Leadership' (ITL) project (Frost, 2011). It has focused on teacher-led innovation in a number of countries in the Balkans and elsewhere in Europe and has explored how this contributes to educational reform. Project team members in the participating countries have worked in collaboration with head teachers and other facilitators to establish programmes that enable teachers to embed innovations in their schools. Through a process of cross-programme evaluation and international networking, the project team has been able to refine and develop strategies, techniques, tools and materials that can be used as a framework to support a renewal of teacher professionalism and school reform across Europe (ibid.).

### **8.3 Practice transfer**

Despite the possible benefits of networks in sharing educational knowledge, questions still remain as to how this knowledge can best be transferred in different contexts. Many studies have investigated the ways in which comparative evidence on school improvement can initiate or legitimise patterns of 'borrowing' and 'lending' around the world (Auld and Morris, 2014). Harris notes that 'while policy borrowing is far from a new enterprise, the harsh reality is that even the best policies travel badly' (2012, p. 395). A considerable amount of research evidence also suggests that spreading good practice is difficult. This is particularly so in the education sectors, where a series of complex variables is involved in the transfer of good practice from one context to another (Auld and Morris, 2014; Bridges, 2014; Fielding et al., 2005; Ozga, 2004).

Moreover, good policy and practice are not always obvious or unanimously accepted. Barzanò (2011) investigated case studies in England, France, Italy and Portugal. She noted that policy-makers from many countries look at the English accountability framework with interest, poised to borrow hints and tools from its orderly atmosphere of regulation. However, English education professionals experience strong contradictions and struggle with the system's hardness and sharpness. Harris et al. (2013) also stress that the selection and implementation of school reform and improvement approaches have poor empirical evidence. They are usually disconnected from the context within which they are enacted. As Auld and Morris argue:

*Developments in the form and application of comparative education must therefore be understood with regard to their broader intellectual backdrop, and*



*the social and political conditions within which they emerge, and to which they respond* (2014, p. 131).

The process of transferring practice usually involves one school/teacher as the originator of good practice and another school/teacher as the partner/learner and recipient of the activity to be transferred. It also often involves transfer from relatively rich and powerful countries to relatively poor and less powerful countries. Bridges (2014) raises concerns about this process and characterises it as being practically inappropriate, culturally insensitive and sometimes oppressive. He suggests thinking about international transfer of educational policy and practice as a form of teaching and learning:

*The 'borrowers' are the learners; the 'lenders' are the teachers – allowing of course that here as in any other educational setting the teaching and learning is not entirely one way* (2014, p. 95).

Similarly, instead of the 'policy borrowing' approach, Raffe argues for a 'policy learning' approach to practice transfer, which should be guided by the following principles:

- *Use international experience to enrich policy analysis, not to short-cut it ...*
- *Look for good practice not best practice ...*
- *Don't study only 'successful' systems. Studying only successful systems is not the best way to discover the sources of their success ...*
- *Use international experience to understand your own system. International comparisons can 'make the familiar strange' and help us to understand our own system ...*
- *Learn from history. A policy learning approach combines this cross-national learning with a capacity and willingness to learn from the past ...*
- *Devise appropriate structures of governance* (2011, pp. 3–4).

Furthermore, Ozga outlines a series of mechanisms which underline the complexity of the educational sector and need to be considered in the transfer of knowledge and skills. Firstly, 'effective knowledge transfer needs preparation from both partners in the process'. Secondly, 'effective knowledge transfer is not linear', but requires 'discussion, problem solving and joint development'. Thirdly, 'teaching is a practical rather than a technical activity'; it is strictly connected to the context in which it takes place. Therefore, it is difficult for research to make a valid contribution and provide a universal solution to specific problems. Fourthly, research in education may not necessarily produce 'actionable knowledge', as it reflects particular schools and classroom situations. Finally, what works in education



should be understood in terms of ‘what works for whom and in what circumstances’ (2004, p. 3).

From this discussion it can be inferred that practice transfer should be interpreted in terms of a social process, rather than a simple transferring of practice from one context to another. What becomes crucial is the ‘meta-practice of improvement’ – the way teachers ‘think about, evaluate or seek to improve their practice’ (Fielding et al., 2005, p. 56). Practice transfer involves teachers’ professional growth, rather than applying someone else’s ideas and practices to their everyday work. It requires the development of teachers’ existing repertoire of practice. For this reason, it can be described in terms of joint practice development rather than the delivery of pre-formed packages of practice or the mere reproduction of other teachers’ practice (Fielding et al., 2005).

In that effort, Becheikh et al. (2010) emphasise the role of a linkage agent who can build relationships and create connectivity. The authors argue that knowledge transfer in education should be based on a social interaction model that places emphasis on both researchers and practitioners’ strengths and weaknesses. Linkage agents can synthesise information when necessary in order to make the language easier and more accessible for final users. They can also promote exchanges and interactions between practitioners in the long term and promote the culture of critical thinking which is essential to foster change.





## 9. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR RAISING ACHIEVEMENT

### 9.1 Inclusive education: from 'why' to 'how'

The global spread of ideas and norms about human rights and, in particular, the right of all learners to quality education, has resulted in most countries changing their legislation and policies. This is in an effort to support schools in improving the education they provide to a learner population that is diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, social class, language and disabilities. The recent *Joint Report of the Council and the Commission* encourages educational systems in:

*Further exploring the potential of **innovative and active pedagogies** such as inter-disciplinary teaching and collaborative methods, to enhance the development of relevant and high-level skills and competences, while fostering inclusive education, including for disadvantaged learners and learners with disabilities* (European Commission, 2015c, p. 33).

However, there are still concerns about the problems facing schools under the dual pressure of becoming more inclusive and, at the same time, responding to demands to raise learners' achievements and combat school failure (Muijs et al., 2011). Various studies have considered the impact of inclusion on academic achievement across a whole range of curriculum areas in different education levels. They have shown the positive impact of inclusive placements for learners with disabilities (European Agency, 2012b). Moreover, the recent meta-analysis by Dyssegaard and Larsen (2013) showed that the academic and social development of learners without disabilities does not suffer when learners with SEN are included in the mainstream classroom.

Recent research evidence also suggests that learners with SEN make better progress when they are educated in mainstream settings (Wild et al., 2015). For example, a nationwide empirical study in Germany compared the learning outcomes of learners with SEN in mainstream schools with the results of such learners in special schools. The project revealed that learners with SEN in mainstream schools were six months ahead in mathematics and reading and up to twelve months ahead in their listening skills. These results indicate that learners with SEN in inclusive settings can learn more than their peers in special schools (Institute for Educational Quality Improvement, 2014). Moreover, research has reported additional benefits of inclusion for learners from different backgrounds and ethnic minorities, such as Roma learners. It can promote their own as well as their families' social inclusion and well-being (Fremlova, 2011).

Despite the international policy mandates and the accumulation of positive research evidence in favour of inclusion, too often learners who are perceived to be different for any reason are still marginalised or excluded. This further perpetuates social and



educational inequalities. A report by the European Commission notes that, although Member States have committed to promoting inclusive education, children with SEN or from disadvantaged backgrounds are ‘still getting a raw deal’ (2012b, p. 1).

It is important to note at this point that ‘inclusion’ is used and understood in a variety of ways and contexts (European Agency, 2013a). In their critical analysis, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) found four different understandings of inclusive education:

1. Inclusion as the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms
2. Inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of learners with disabilities
3. Inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of all learners
4. Inclusion as the creation of communities.

Focusing on a ‘needs-based’ model of disability that uses remediation and compensatory approaches fails to increase the capacity or capability of schools and education systems. Discussions about meeting the needs of vulnerable groups of learners need to stop focusing solely on provision and placement. Instead, they should include a concrete and detailed focus on outcomes (Ekins, 2013). Florian specifically notes that:

*A focus on different groups of learners as a way of determining ‘all’ is problematic because of the variation within and between any identified groups. Yet, provision is often organised in this way ... despite the fact that individuals usually fit into more than one category (2010, p. 64).*

Nasir and colleagues put forward the view that diversity should be regarded as a ‘pedagogical asset’ of effective educational systems (2006, p. 498). This position sees all learners as equally valued, listened to and provided with opportunities for full participation in all learning and social opportunities. Inclusive systems should develop forms of teaching and learning that enable all learners to participate fully in the learning process and prevent school failure. This approach to inclusion can contribute to the development of alternative thinking and ‘allow the reality of diversity in all its forms into the debate’ (Mac Ruairc, 2013, p. 11). It becomes evident that the argument in favour of inclusion, as opposed to other segregated forms of education, is a position which has been repeatedly justified. It is now, in the context of UNCRPD, almost universally accepted (for example, please refer to UNICEF, 2012; European Commission, 2015c; United Nations, 2006).

The RA4AL project conference, held in Denmark under the Danish Presidency of the EU (June 2012), pointed to the need for more robust research at the system level to support the move from the ‘why’ to the ‘how’ of inclusive education. Different kinds



of data and information focusing more on inclusive processes, the quality of teaching and the educational outcomes are essential in order to create the background conditions to raise the achievement of all learners in inclusive settings.

## 9.2 Inclusive education and raising achievement

Inclusive practice can be seen as a multi-component strategy or, as Mitchell puts it, a ‘mega-strategy’ (2014, p. 27) for raising achievement. The OECD (2012) notes that reducing school failure has a positive impact both on society and on individuals. It highlights that the highest performing education systems across OECD countries are those that combine quality with equity. In fact, the PISA 2012 report confirms that high performance and equity in education opportunities is possible. The evidence from the report suggests that:

*Of the 13 countries and economies that significantly improved their mathematics performance between 2003 and 2012, three also show improvements in equity in education during the same period, and another nine improved their performance while maintaining an already high level of equity – proving that countries do not have to sacrifice high performance to achieve equity in education (OECD, 2013, p. 3).*

It is now increasingly acknowledged that reorganising ordinary schools within the community, through school improvement, is the most effective way of ensuring that all learners can learn effectively, including those categorised as having SEN (Ainscow and César, 2006). The INCLUD-ED project findings suggest that inclusive practice not only provides equal opportunities, but can also provide more equitable outcomes for all learners. To quote: ‘inclusion overcomes mixture and streaming, leading schools to improve their results both with regards to academic learning and living together’ (INCLUD-ED, 2012, p. 4).

Persson (2012) also supports the notion that inclusive education can raise academic achievement in schools. Her study examines key elements that make a difference in schools and classrooms in work with all learners. The results show that focusing on goal fulfilment through inclusion gives a wider definition to the concept of successful schooling and changes the school’s traditional thought style.

A notable example of successful school improvement, focusing on the outcomes of vulnerable learners, is the ‘Achievement for All’ programme in the UK. It is designed to support schools to provide better opportunities for learners with disabilities to fulfil their potential (Humphrey et al., 2013). The aim is to improve outcomes for learners with disabilities through: academic assessment, tracking and intervention, structured conversations with parents, and developing provision to improve wider outcomes (e.g. positive relationships). The project emphasises the importance of leadership and building on existing good practice within schools to improve



outcomes for the learners. This example illustrates how a whole-school approach to increase aspiration, access and achievement (the 3As) can lead to improved learner outcomes across schools (Blandford and Knowles, 2014).

As previously mentioned, the promotion of learner participation is an essential feature in improving achievement and attainment (please refer to the chapter on Active Learners). Tetler et al. (2010) highlight the importance of listening to the voices of at-risk learners, in order to understand their perceptions of the learning environment, their motives, incentives and will to learn. As Portela (2013) notes, learner participation contributes to the creation of new realities. These add something different to the existing order and can ultimately contribute to its reconstruction.

According to Mannion et al., positive learner-learner and learner-teacher relationships, meaningful and purposeful activities, respectful communication and inclusive relations can support participation. These factors can create a sense of belonging at school. This brings a rights-based dimension to the educational experience, influences change and encourages learners to do well. The authors particularly emphasise that 'participation is a core vehicle for the goal of achievement and attainment and is a critical part of the wider education of the young person' (2015, p. 40). They conclude that: 'Schools can and should robustly and confidently integrate rights-based practice across all of school life as part of a raising attainment and achievement agenda' (ibid., p. 44).

Fullan and Langworthy (2014), in their discussion on new pedagogies, stress the importance of teachers' pedagogical capacity. This includes teachers' ability to use a range of teaching practices and to work in partnership with learners in order to raise achievement through deep learning. Florian uses the term 'inclusive pedagogy', referring to:

*... an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners, but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently (2014, p. 289).*

Florian and Spratt (2013) have developed an inclusive framework as an analysis tool that permits a deeper understanding of the ways in which teachers enact inclusive pedagogy. Furthermore, Pantić and Florian discuss the possibilities of combining theories of inclusive pedagogy and teacher agency for developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice.

*These possibilities include: 1) nurturing commitment to social justice as part of teachers' sense of purpose; 2) developing competencies in inclusive pedagogical approaches, including working with others; 3) developing relational agency for transforming the conditions of teachers' workplaces; and 4) a capacity to reflect*



*on their own practices and environments when seeking to support the learning of all students (2015, p. 333).*

Furthermore, the OoP project highlighted some common elements across different contexts that might move thinking towards ‘what works’ in helping all learners to succeed. These include:

- *inclusion as a process that requires changes in the whole education system, rather than simply where learners with disabilities are educated;*
- *the need to increase the capacity of schools and develop their competence to benefit all learners, which may include developing the role of special schools to provide training, support and specialist resources;*
- *the importance of listening to learners and their families in the organisation of any additional support;*
- *the development of ‘inclusive’ attitudes and beliefs in teachers and the will to take responsibility for all learners ...*
- *the importance of distributed leadership to ensure a positive culture and ethos in all schools;*
- *the importance of networking and collaboration in providing support at all levels, including school-to-school collaboration (mainstream and special schools) and partnerships with other agencies to provide support to individual learners in the local school and community;*
- *the development of equitable funding approaches which aim to improve the school system for all learners through collaboration, rather than providing an incentive to identify and label learners (European Agency, 2013a, p. 63).*

Finally, it should be noted that this review and the wider RA project work go beyond the promotion of inclusive education. They emphasise the need for schools to build and sustain a trajectory of improvement with the ultimate goal of becoming more equitable. As the RA4AL synthesis report stresses:

*Rather than revisiting definitions of inclusive education or justifying a move to more inclusive approaches, policy makers, school leaders and teachers should collaborate to:*

- *Ensure equity – providing access to education that is not compromised by poverty, social class, gender, race or disability;*
- *Work efficiently – maximising outcomes in cost-effective ways;*
- *Achieve excellence – through a holistic education that will improve the lives of all young people (European Agency, 2012b, p. 5).*



## 10. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This review has aimed to provide background information from current research knowledge and educational practice in order to support learning communities in their school improvement efforts. It has particularly discussed the main themes that are considered critical in raising achievement and which also play a key part in developing inclusive practice. The overall discussion indicates several key messages that stakeholders should consider when trying to promote change in schools. These can be summarised as follows.

First of all, the process of organisational learning and cultural change in schools enables successful school improvement. This process also entails applying inclusive pedagogical principles and quality teaching that is based on personalised learning. Quality instruction includes the flexible use of various teaching strategies, as well as teacher collaboration, in order to increase understanding and determine how and when to use these strategies. It also requires a pedagogy for the application of technology which can promote personalised learning, as well as the use of a flexible, inclusive curriculum. Such a curriculum focuses more on wider skills, sets high expectations and provides meaningful opportunities for all learners. In addition to transforming pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, teachers also need to be aware of the factors that influence learning and attainment. They must work towards nurturing active learners, by listening to their voices and encouraging their participation.

The role of a strong and supportive leadership is also crucial in promoting inclusive change. Flexible leadership actions for improved learner outcomes include the distribution of roles and responsibilities, taking ownership of building teacher capacity, assuming responsibility for learner success, listening to learners' voices and establishing the necessary conditions for teachers to improve their practice. Effective leadership actions also focus on promoting collaborative learning and creating professional learning communities in which all stakeholders participate equally and share a common vision. These communities go beyond the school boundaries and form close partnerships with the learners' parents/carers, other schools, universities and local communities. International networking is also seen as a useful means for transferring knowledge and practice and applying them to different educational contexts. It is useful to view this transfer as a 'learning' approach, which involves discussion, problem solving and joint professional development of different educational agents.

Finally, it must be kept in mind that raising the achievement of all learners is an endeavour which should be underpinned by inclusive principles. Promoting inclusive practice is closely connected with school improvement efforts to improve equity



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and enhance outcomes for all learners. Therefore, practice that ensures the learning, participation and success of all learners represents the best way forward in school improvement. It is now more important than ever to strengthen our actions towards:

*... renewed efforts to reinforce the teaching and acceptance of these common fundamental values and laying the foundations for more inclusive societies through education (European Commission, 2015b).*



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Secretariat:

Østre Stationsvej 33  
DK-5000  
Odense C  
Denmark  
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20  
[secretariat@european-agency.org](mailto:secretariat@european-agency.org)

Brussels Office:

Rue Montoyer 21  
BE-1000  
Brussels  
Belgium  
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80  
[brussels.office@european-agency.org](mailto:brussels.office@european-agency.org)

[www.european-agency.org](http://www.european-agency.org)

