



INCLUSION IN THE IRISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SECOND LEVEL AND FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING SECTORS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents ten policy recommendations on inclusive education in Ireland for Second Level education and Further Education and Training (FET). The recommendations were drawn from the Erasmus+ funded TUTOR project research study. The TUTOR Project is a 3.5 year study across Ireland, Austria, Greece, Turkey, and at EU level in Belgium. The research methodology consisted of desk-based literature review of national and European policies, best practice, and research, as well as conducting primary research in the form of surveys, focus groups, and interviews with over 800 educators and key stakeholders in education, culminating in the identification of gaps between desired and actual state of inclusive education at EU and at Irish level. These identified gaps then informed the development of a continuous professional development (CPD) programme which was piloted in Ireland by Irish lead partner Maynooth University in April 2025. Across the consortium to date, nearly 2000 educators and key stakeholders undertook research activities that informed the policy recommendations.

Inclusion has favourable effects on social-emotional skills, academic achievement, school engagement, peer acceptance, and sustainable relationships among all students. Yet, existing literature points to a lag in the adoption of inclusive education by teachers and educational institutions. Various factors shape an education system and an individual's experience within it, and processes of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization are ever-present. The aim of this research is to create a more inclusive education for all. The TUTOR project research study focused on three main target groups:

1. Students who identify as LGBTQI+
2. Students who currently experience socio-economic disadvantage or come from communities historically impacted by socio-economic disadvantage
3. Students who are migrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities

SUMMARY OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Through its research with over 800 participants, the TUTOR partnership has learned of the difficulties that are faced when trying to understand and implement inclusive education. These include understandings, language, skills, and tools. They also involve school leadership, local communities, and at government level.

Through the research we have made ten policy recommendations:

1. Department of Education & Youth (DEY) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) should ensure its definition of inclusive education is up to date ensuring more inclusive practice, including the definition of inclusive education across all policy documents.
2. The relevant departments of DEY and DFHERIS should engage with a broad range of education stakeholders about inclusive education, the challenges, and the opportunities it offers on an ongoing basis. They can do this by building an online, guided community of practice for educators and leadership across the country.
3. DEY and DFHERIS should adapt the inspection tools to take into account practice (teaching and leadership) within a human rights approach in schools and FET centres.
4. DEY and DFHERIS should continue to develop and update relevant inclusion guidelines (such as the *Being LGBT in Schools* guidelines (DES 2020)) and make the BeLong To Quality Mark a requirement for all schools and places of learning to support LGBTQI+ students and teachers.
5. Use the TUTOR CPD programme to inform the building of a module on inclusive education to be used in all Initial Teacher Education programmes and CPD programmes for Further Education and Training.
6. Support the delivery of the TUTOR inclusive education programme into the Education Centres nationwide for Second level and Further Education educators.
7. Curriculum – building on the current curricular changes to encourage a wider understanding of inclusion – diversity / representation.
8. Requirements for ongoing professional development by Teaching Council for school teachers and FET educators should include clear components on inclusive education.
9. Investment in an inclusive learning environment which emphasises a holistic approach of pastoral care.
10. Supporting School Leadership in its practices (at implementation, resources, and staff supports levels) to be more inclusive.

These policy recommendations, if enacted, will provide a concrete roadmap to creating inclusive education environments in Ireland which will lead to greater social-emotional skills, academic achievement, school engagement, peer acceptance, and sustainable relationships amongst all students and school communities.

MEET THE RESEARCH TEAM



Professor Bernie Grummell

Professor Bernie Grummell was the Principal Investigator for the Maynooth University team within the TUTOR Project consortium. She is a professor in the Departments of Adult & Community Education and Education, Maynooth University. She is currently the co-director of the Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education Programme and the Structured PhD in Adult & Community Education, as well as co-director of the Centre for Research in Adult Learning and Education in the Department of Adult and Community Education. She is a member of the social science research subcommittee and the Athena Swan Committee in Maynooth University, as well as actively engaging with policy, community and civil society groups. Her research explores the landscape, processes and experiences of social justice, inclusion and transformation across different sectors of education and society. She is currently engaged in research on Youthreach staff wellbeing and transformative community education in Malawi and Zambia. She has completed research on adult literacy for the Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA), and developed a series of policy briefing papers on inclusion in the adult literacy services for SOLAS, ETBI, NALA (2020-2021).



Dr. Margaret Nugent

Margaret was a researcher on the Maynooth University team within the TUTOR Consortium. She is a Research Fellow and lecturer in the Department of Adult & Community Education in Maynooth University. She has collaborated at a national and international level with a number of civil society organisations, higher education institutions, and Further Education and Training colleges. Margaret's research and teaching interests are focused on the philosophy of education, inclusive education, critical and engaged adult education, initial teacher education, peace pedagogy, conflict intervention, mediation, community and rural development, continuous professional development in the FET sector, and participatory research methodologies.



Dr. Sinéad Matson

Sinead was a post-doctoral researcher on the Maynooth University team within the TUTOR Project consortium. She has worked across a number of areas in Education such as early childhood education and care, Montessori primary schooling, second level teacher training, and further and higher education. As such, her research interests lie in diversity and inclusion in education, decolonising childhoods, and methodologies for equitable and ethical research. Sinéad has also spent many years project managing, designing, and writing educational programmes and curricula that have been validated by QQI in various education institutions.

A WORD OF THANKS

The TUTOR Project has been a wonderful project to spend the last three and a half years working on. The research consortium was comprised of ten organisations spread across four countries (Ireland, Austria, Greece & Turkey) and at EU level in Belgium. It was funded by Erasmus+, which allowed for the rich tapestry of academic institutions and civil society partners to come together and create a body of knowledge with just under 2,000 stakeholders from Second Level and Further Education & Training across the five countries.

This richness of teacher, leadership, and advocacy voices came from: (1) 800+ stakeholders taking part in questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews, (2) 80 Stakeholder meetings (3) approximately 800 TUTOR CPD programme pilot participants, (4) 12 TUTOR Ambassadors (5) 80+ mobility participants, and finally (6) approximately 50 trainers engaged in training to deliver the TUTOR CPD programme.

It was through the wonderful educators, leadership, and advocates giving their time, knowledge, and wealth of experience that truly made the project what it was. On behalf of the research team, I would like to thank each and every participant for engaging with the project and sharing with us so generously to help co-create the evidence which informed and shaped these recommendations.

I would also like to thank many other stakeholders who supported our research team:

- Dr. Gareth Burns from Dublin City University for being the Irish representative on our Quality Assurance Board and for his careful and considered insights into the development of this document.
- Our colleagues in the Department of Adult & Community Education and the Department of Education for serving on oversight committees, advising, taking part in webinars, organising logistics across four countries, and offering the research team guidance and support.
- TUTOR ambassadors, Jamie Kenny, Melanie Groening-McKenna, and Macdara Deery for taking on the voluntary labour of spreading word of the project, giving their time and expertise during webinars, and leading the field in their work on inclusion.

Finally, I would like to thank all of our partners in the research consortium who worked tirelessly over many years to get this very important research completed.

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INTRODUCTION:

This report presents ten policy recommendations on inclusive education in Ireland for Second Level and Further Education and Training (FET). The recommendations were drawn from the Erasmus+ funded TUTOR project research study. The research methodology consisted of desk-based literature review of national and European policies, best practice, and research, as well as conducting primary research in the form of anonymous surveys, focus groups, and interviews with educators and key stakeholders in education, culminating in the identification of gaps between desired and actual state of inclusive education at EU and at Irish level. These identified gaps then informed the development of a continuous professional development (CPD) programme. The TUTOR project is a 3.5 year study with the objective of creating a European and international perspective within teacher education, with a strong emphasis on inclusivity. This initiative aims to create partnerships between teacher education and training providers, laying the groundwork for the establishment of Teacher Academies. These academies will be centres of inclusive education, dedicated to aligning their efforts with the overarching objectives set forth by the European Education Area. The TUTOR project recognises the need for teachers to enhance their skills. This involves equipping them with the essential abilities to respond to the diversity within their classrooms. The partnership is made up of ten partners throughout Ireland, Greece, Belgium, Austria, and Turkey. This policy recommendation report will focus on recommendations for Ireland that came out of the research results.



CONTEXT & RATIONALE

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

“ [INCLUSION IS] THE MAJOR CHALLENGE FACING
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS AROUND THE WORLD
(AINSCOW, 2005, P.109) ”

Inclusion has favourable effects on social-emotional skills, academic achievement, school engagement, peer acceptance, and sustainable relationships among all students[i]. Yet, existing literature points to a lag in the adoption of inclusive education by teachers and educational institutions[ii]. The National Council for Special Education in Ireland described inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners (2011). It involves removing barriers so that each learner will be enabled to achieve the maximum benefit from their schooling. The Irish Department of Education guidelines (2007) constitute an inclusive school as characterized by a continuous process of development and self-evaluation in the school with a view to eliminating barriers. Mission statements, admission policies and procedures are pivotal in establishing a positive agenda for inclusion. Schools are advised to revise their culture and ethos, organizational arrangements, curriculum content and approaches to teaching and learning. The Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019) set out a strong commitment to ‘active inclusion’ in the Irish Further Education and Training sector[iii]. This was influenced by the EU Commission’s definition of active inclusion (2008). This focus on inclusion was continued in the Irish FET Strategy Future FET: Transforming Learning plan (2020-2024) which identified ‘Fostering inclusion’ as one of its core strategic pillars[iv].

Internationally inclusive education is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners (Ainscow, 2005). Reflecting the broader context of increased recognition and rights, international policies of inclusion informed by a human rights approach. UNESCO contend that, in terms of education, inclusion is about how to transform education systems and other learning environments to respond to the diversity of learners. It aims towards enabling educators and learners both to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem. The term inclusion shifts the focus from the individual student to the structures and cultures of education institution and society, and that inclusion aims to end discrimination and to work towards equal opportunities for all.



Various factors shape an education system and an individual's experience within it, and processes of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization are ever-present. An intersectional lens in inclusive education is essential to identify the interaction of multiple factors that can lead to discriminatory processes in schools' access and participation towards different student groups. Educational outcomes and opportunities for students are influenced by the contextual interplay of different identity markers and the intersection with historically perpetuated inequalities within a stratified society. In the TUTOR project, inclusive education focused on three main target groups:

1. Students who identify as LGBTQI+
2. Students who currently experience socio-economic disadvantage or come from communities historically impacted by socio-economic disadvantage
3. Students who are migrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities

STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQI+

“IT IS EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY MANY LGBTQI+ YOUNG PEOPLE ARE STILL EXPERIENCING HIGH LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION AT SCHOOL”
(IGLYO, 2022)

In 2020, the European Commission adopted the LGBTQI+ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which aims to promote equality for LGBTQI+ people. The key pillars of the strategy include tackling discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, ensuring LGBTQI+ people's safety, building LGBTQI+ inclusive societies and leading the call for LGBTQI+ equality around the world. The EU Progress Report on implementing the LGBTQI+ Strategy (2020-2025) highlights that LGBTQI+ people face discriminatory and often violent barriers hampering their full and equal enjoyment of the right to positive physical and mental health.

In recent years, hate speech and hate crime targeting persons and organizations supporting LGBTQI+ rights have increased globally, including across the European Union. According to the progress report, 11% of LGBTQI+ respondents in the EU were physically or sexually assaulted in the 5 years before the survey (2019). The EEAS Agenda for Diversity and Inclusion was launched in 2023, which aims to further strengthen existing mechanisms and enhance the awareness and skills of staff when it comes to diversity and inclusion. In 2020-2021, the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons were raised in human rights dialogues with countries in all regions, many of which were chaired by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore.



The LGBTQI+ Inclusive Education Report and Index 2022[v] provides qualitative data on a set of 10 indicators that cover anti-discrimination legislation, education policies and anti-bullying action plans, initial teacher education, teacher training, inclusive curricula, and the existence of support systems, information and guidelines. The report notes that whilst the aspirations and interventions as outlined above are indicators of some progression, nevertheless the findings note that ‘only 6 Member States provide most of the recommended measures, and 10 have failed to implement any’, therefore learners receive limited or no LGBTQI+ inclusive content in schools. Where there are inclusive policies in existence, the report notes that ‘inclusive policies do not translate into other measures, such as inclusive curricula or teacher training’. The report also highlights that ‘Many teachers still report that they lack the confidence to talk about LGBTQI+ topics and support LGBTQI+ students, yet only two Member States have introduced mandatory teacher training on LGBTQI+ topics.’ Equally the issue of representation and visibility is important, ‘Research shows that having a reactive approach to discrimination at school is not enough. The general invisibility and lack of positive representations of LGBTQI+ people in schools has negative consequences for all learners’ (IGLYO 2022).

According to the EU progress report, the Irish LGBTQI+ Inclusion Strategy was underpinned by a ‘robust consultation process’. Specific workshop sessions were organized also for applicants for international protection, migrants, and refugees to ensure that the voices of the more marginalized members of the LGBTQI+ community were adequately heard. The LGBTQI+ Inclusion Strategy (2017-2019) builds on existing equality policy and is situated within the framework of safeguards provided by Ireland’s equality legislation. The national strategy offers a framework in which to address intersectionality (where people may be subject to discrimination on more than one of the nine equality grounds in Irish legislation, i.e., gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community). It is intended in this regard that the structures overseeing this LGBTQI+ Strategy will link with other relevant national policies relating to the National Strategy for Women and Girls, the LGBTQI+ Youth Strategy, the Migrant Integration Strategy, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy and the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy to enable crosscutting issues affecting LGBTQI+ people who are members of the Traveller Community, Roma, people with disabilities, migrants, young people, or women to be addressed in a more systematic way.

The National Youth Strategy (2015-2020) identified LGBTQI+ young people as a specific group to be considered in the context of focused provision for marginalized young people. While the situation has improved in Ireland over recent years, significant challenges remain for LGBTQI+ young people today, as reported in the Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland (2024) research study.

This research study is the most recent with the widest participation. It states that young LGBTQI+ people are reporting increases in feelings of stress, depression, and anxiety; large numbers are reporting homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic bullying in school; and are increasingly self-harming and are dealing with suicidal ideation[vi]. Forty-seven percent of LGBTQI+ youths in the research regarded their school as LGBTQI+ unfriendly, 31% felt that they did not belong, and 79% reported witnessing homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic bullying in school[vii]. This overwhelmingly had a negative effect on their school experience, leading to 37% of gay people and 33% of queer people skipping or dropping out of school[viii]. Participants in this research agreed that LGBTQI+ topics should be included in second level education and that teachers should communicate positiveness surrounding the topic[ix].

STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

“the education system as it currently stands is unfair and unequal and that the consequences of this are stark ... Travellers, lone parents, people who have disabilities, who are homeless, or who are in the care of the state, asylum seekers and those who are from less affluent backgrounds are destined to struggle”
(Fleming and Harford, 2022, p. xx)

Based on our research, we have defined socio-economic disadvantage as referring to living in less favorable social and economic circumstances than the majority of others in the same society. These circumstances can arise from a complex interplay of factors such as poverty, health, housing, education, and family background, and the resulting lack of opportunities and expectations open to people. It refers to deprivation of material, cultural and social resources in life, relative to others which leads to exclusion from participation in society[x]. It has been associated with experiences of persistent intergenerational disadvantage, exclusion and marginalization, and acknowledges that schools and colleges are major institutions of selection and stratification for the labor market as they mediate life chances within the economy[xi]. Groups defined by socio-economic disadvantage have traditionally been defined by occupational background, such as working class or unemployed groups.

Socio-economically disadvantaged students include those at a risk of poverty, educational disadvantaged, geographical barriers, marginalized and ethnic groups, including Traveller and Roma. Several strategy and policy documents address the challenges associated with socio-economic disadvantaged students, including intersectionality at EU level. These include:

- The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020).
- The 2013 Commission Recommendation ‘Investing in Students: breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ (European Commission, 2013).
- The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017).



In Ireland, the main policy initiative in schools for socio-economic disadvantage is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). DEIS is a targeted intervention to support schools which have high levels of educationally disadvantaged students. The DEIS Plan 2017 sets out the Department of Education's policy and supports for schools. Currently, there are 198 second-level schools in DEIS in Ireland. A review of the DEIS programme undertaken in 2015 (DES, 2015) identified three areas of the DEIS programme as being excellent supports:

1. Home School Community Liaison Coordinator,
2. professional development opportunities for teachers, and
3. the position of a resource teacher for Travellers.

However, these supports continue to operate in isolation. The benefits of professional development (e.g., schemes such as First Steps, Reading Recovery) for DEIS teachers are sometimes outweighed by the challenge in sustaining these programmes and embedding them in schools when trained individual staff members leave the school, as well as the heavy burden of administration associated with DEIS and other initiatives. The current system of inequality is being legitimized through the ideologies of meritocracy, equalizing opportunity is inadequate and has not worked[xii]. Many researchers have pointed to the need to provide a tapered form of the DEIS programme to take account of those schools and students which fall outside of the qualification criteria for full inclusion[iii].

There is general agreement that there should be an increased focus on student's physical and emotional wellbeing particularly in relation to diversity, students who live in direct provision, and students from the Travelling community. In 2017, the DEIS plan, identified student well-being as a priority and provides training and resources to the Friends programme at post-primary level which addresses mental resilience and personal wellbeing[xiii]. A recent report on wellbeing in the Youthreach sector[xiv], highlights the need for 'recognition of the extended relational and support role for learners that Youthreach staff hold'[xv]. The Youthreach Programme was introduced in 1989 as the Irish government's primary response to early school leaving and was designed to provide young people with access to education and training, progression and social inclusion[xvi].

The findings of the Addressing Education Disadvantage Review (2017) highlighted that teacher expectations tend to be lower than warranted by independent outcome data for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. There is a need for debate around what is sometimes considered the 'deficit' understandings of working-class communities[xvii]. The detail of the mechanisms by which students are impacted by the expectations of their teachers, and the precise effects of such expectations, are still not well understood. There is an absence of reliable data, valid methods of measuring expectations, and of effective strategies to raise teachers' expectations. Assisting teachers to become aware of their own prejudices and educating them about the power of their expectations for their students, might well serve to reduce the achievement gap between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off counterparts.

STUDENTS WHO ARE MIGRANTS, REFUGEES, OR ETHNIC MINORITIES

With the contemporary waves of migration into Europe, both economic and refugee, the policy interventions firstly focused upon the integration of migrants into the educational system, by providing host country language support. The concept of integration is now shifting towards greater reflection upon how best to include migrants from many countries in a real and meaningful way. To this effect, the movement has trended beyond intercultural education, which was experienced as limited in its capacity to have meaningful impact, towards a more inclusive and holistic, person centered approach to inclusivity that has emerged in the policy and strategy documents, and within European Commission policy directives.

The European Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) is a comprehensive framework that commits to ensuring the integration and inclusion of both migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background. The EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 is a strategic document that acknowledges the right of students from all racial or ethnic backgrounds to have equal access to inclusive education. The plan acknowledges that:

- **Negative social perspective on migrants/refugees** and racialized minorities permeates educational institutions, along with resistance from some educators to deal with the necessary changes to teach the target group.
- European secondary school policies often **do not recognize the complexity and specificity of the needs of migrant/refugee students**. In general, there is a lack of a comprehensive system of support to them and tackle the inequalities and educational barriers that this group of disadvantaged students face.
- **The distance of some families with a migrant background or families from ethnic minorities** from the dominant culture, and their lack of inclusion in school activities and school life is an important obstacle to inclusive education and a factor that triggers school segregation.

The Department of Justice and Equality's (2017) Migrant Integration Strategy: A Blueprint for the Future (2017-2020), defines integration in current Irish policy as the "ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity"[xix]. The Strategy identifies actions including those designed to encourage those from migrant and minority ethnic backgrounds into the teaching profession. "*Proactive efforts will be made to attract migrants into teaching positions*"[xx]. Action 31 states "*The effectiveness of training for teachers on managing diversity and tackling racism will be reviewed.*" Action 36 states "*The fostering and development of positive attitudes towards diversity and celebrating difference will continue to form part of the school curriculum.*"[xxi].

The Programme for Access to Higher Education: Strand 1: Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education (PATH 1), HEA (2017) led policy initiative focused on supporting teacher diversity did not list students from migrant/minority backgrounds as a target group despite the evidenced patterns of under-representation of minority ethnic groups in ITE in Ireland (see Burns et al. 2024; Keane, Heinz, and McDaid 2023). As part of this policy initiative Marino Institute of Education established the Migrant Teacher Project, and Maynooth University's established its HEA-funded PATH 1 programme, Turn to Teaching, a widening participation project which aims to diversify the teaching profession in Ireland.



TRAVELLER AND ROMA POLICY

*‘Recognition of the distinct heritage, culture and identity of Travellers and their special place in Irish society would be hugely important to Traveller pride, to Traveller self-esteem and to overcoming the legacy of marginalization and discrimination that the community has experienced.’
(NTRIS, 2017, pp.6).*

According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) the number of Irish Travellers in the Census of population is 30,987[xxii]. In the academic year 2017-2018, only 65 Irish Travellers were accessing Higher Education (DES, 2019).[xxiii] The Roma community in Ireland consists of persons from a range of European countries including Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic (Czechia). There are no official statistics on the number of Roma in Ireland, but it is estimated to be in the region of 3,000 – 5,000. The National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS), published in 2017 provides the framework and strategic direction for interventions to improve the lives of Travellers and Roma in Ireland in practical and tangible ways. The National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) (2017-2019) identifies the principle of inclusion as the core of the Strategy and, accordingly, the focus of current education provision is on the development of a more inclusive school environment through the whole school planning process, teaching practice, admissions policies, codes of behaviour and whole school evaluation.

The ‘Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR)’ pilot project in education was established in 2019 under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) with the aim of improving attendance, participation and school completion in primary and secondary education in specific Traveller and Roma communities regionally. Education-related actions include the aims of achieving equality of education outcomes, supporting an inclusive school community, and promoting a positive culture of respect and protection for the cultural identity of Travellers and Roma in education. The Programme for Access to Higher Education, PATH, names Travellers as a priority group for support and the recently launched PATH 5 strand has a specific focus on supporting Traveller and Roma students to access, participate and succeed in higher education. The objectives of PATH strand 1 are to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups entering initial teacher education, and to provide more role models for students from these groups.

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AND CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher education issues are high on the policy agenda across Europe. Currently the literature suggests that European teachers do not feel that they have the required competencies regarding how to work with a culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse student population. European teaching staff are insufficiently prepared and trained to deal with diverse classroom settings. The European Commission (2017) developed a report that noted:

“Education systems need to make sure that initial teacher education (ITE) and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities effectively equip teachers with the relevant intercultural competences, linguistically responsive teaching competences and ability to reflect on their own beliefs, cultural and socioeconomic differences. There is an increasing need to challenge the current negative perceptions of diversity, shifting towards recognising and multiplying its benefits”[xxiv]

Despite the whole of government approach and cross cutting policies on inclusion, the Irish government’s policy on equality and social inclusion poses significant challenges for many schools. The pupil populations of many schools now contain large proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and of ethnic minorities, often in classes with high student teacher ratios. Within diverse contexts second language competencies and cultural competencies become very important. Lack of representation of ethnic, migrant and socio-disadvantaged people in the teaching profession continues to play a limiting factor. Despite interventions, it is rare for pupils from minoritised backgrounds to become teachers. Where advances have been made, role modelling can become problematic, particularly for those teachers who are expected to represent large cohorts of learners, and for the few representatives who are continuously drawn upon to ‘give back’ to society. However, despite an increase in ethnic diversity within the state, the Irish teaching workforce remains starkly mono-ethnic and middle-classed[xxv]. The need for representation within the teaching profession has been highlighted. In 2013, the Diversity in Initial Teacher Education (DITE) longitudinal research study was funded by the Irish Research Council. In 2017, several Irish HEIs received PATH 1 funding from the Higher Education Authority for initiatives to increase teacher diversity. Under this scheme, Maynooth University launched the Turn to Teaching Initiative (TTT), the aims which are to support students from marginalized backgrounds to move into Initial Teacher Education[xxvi].

Numerous studies into inclusion indicate that many teachers still do not have sufficient professional competence in inclusive education, and that currently Initial Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development neither provides them with the necessary knowledge nor covers practices and appropriate models of sustained school development[xxvii]. A number of factors have been identified that influence the embedding of inclusive education within teaching practice. The professional competence of teachers, their expectations, attitudes and relationships, plays a key role in the prevention of exclusion. Language and cultural competencies as well as representation of diversity within the teaching profession remain key contemporary issues. New curricular development at primary and post-primary level in the area of Social Personal & Health Education (SPHE) / Religious & Sexuality Education (RSE) are currently being developed to address some of these concerns, including the NCCA’s (2022)

Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools, and the subsequent development of toolkits to support teachers at primary and post-primary level, and work on new specifications for SPHE commenced with a focus on junior cycle, followed by senior cycle and primary levels.

Leadership practices in the context of schools charged with including minority groups may be recognitive - fostering recognition and positive visibility of 'others' or distributive - implementation of policies, through the investment of time and resources, to support teaching and learning for diversity[xxviii]. Sider and Ling (2021) note that there is an abundance of research on the critical role of school principals in effecting positive student achievements, but not a lot in the area of principals and their role in inclusive education. They identify a gap between the literature on inclusive education and the literature on school leadership, "what is largely missing in the literature is where these two areas intersect" (p. 1). A 2024 comparative study of Ireland and Spain, identified that enhanced and new professional development opportunities were needed to enhance culturally responsive capacities of leadership (Sancho, Brown, O'Hara et al.).[xxix] Despite the prevalence of opportunities for CPD for secondary school teachers, there is currently no national mandatory requirement for engagement by Further Education and Training (FET) teachers in CPD. Even those FET teaching staff who are registered with the Teaching Council are not required to complete a minimum number of hours of CPD to maintain their registration[xxx]. Individual education bodies, centres and associations provide numerous CPD opportunities for teachers in schools and FET, but these are not necessarily communicated or offered systemically to all educators. From the perspective of teacher competence, a need has been identified in many countries for extended and new teacher competence to meet the growing diversity of their students and the challenges of inclusive education[xxxi].

Challenges for teachers in implementing inclusive education include, but are not limited to, identifying the support needs of students, some of whom may be difficult to identify, and the upskilling of practitioners' competencies and skills in order to provide greater support to those students who are at risk of exclusion. In addition, developing teachers' language competencies, within ITE and CPD would support inclusive education. Providing CPD and communities of learning, and support networks for others in the school community is also vital, including for school leaders, those in guidance and other support roles, managers and posts of responsibility, and developing student-led and -centered communities of practice, representation and peer networks.

SUMMARY

Inclusive education benefits students, school communities, and wider society. There is a large body of policies and strategies put in place on a national level and EU wide to ensure more equitable, inclusive schools, and thereby societies. However, inclusive education is currently experienced and typically understood across the partner countries, as education that aims to include all students, with a particular focus on disability and special needs. The literature suggests that limited attention is given to the impact of intersectionality, or of broadening the definition of inclusive education in teachers' practice. Across the EU and in Ireland, teachers have described an insecurity in how they teach, in terms of language, tools, and how to create inclusive environments. Notably, they describe themselves as inadequately trained in inclusive education in their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, apart from additional education needs. They particularly drew attention to the lack of awareness of intersectionality. They noted that they were not adequately trained for when two or more aspects of their students' lives caused 'double disadvantage' – e.g., an immigrant, with English as an additional language, who has learning difficulties such as Dyslexia. Teachers indicated that the curriculum can be a barrier to inclusive education but notably, they also saw it as a potential enabler of greater inclusion. Irish teachers in particular advocated for a Whole of School Approach – that is the inclusion of students, parents, school governance, the Department of Education & Youth, and the private sector. Ten policy recommendations are presented in this report to address practice and policy.

OBJECTIVES

The TUTOR project aims to develop a European and International outlook in teacher education on inclusivity. More specifically, TUTOR aims to:

- Improve the teacher education policies and practices in Europe.
- Define a forward-looking strategy upskilling strategy for secondary school teachers.
- Enhance the European dimension and internationalization of teacher education through innovative and practical collaboration.
- Foster holistic inclusivity in the learning environment, covering all its aspects such as tolerance, non-discrimination, flexibility, etc.
- Assess current and future skill mismatches in the targeted profession.
- Disseminate widely all project products & maintain them after project closure.

With these aims in mind, and after the conduction of the research study, the TUTOR Project has ten policy recommendations for Ireland. Our objectives are to:

1. Change the understanding of inclusive education in education policy to a wider, fuller understanding that, promotes an intersectional understanding of the complexities of inclusive education for students and staff.
2. Ensure the adoption of the fuller understanding of inclusive education language in policy documents, initial teacher education, continuous teacher education, pedagogy and in practice.
3. Train second level and further education teachers and leadership in inclusive education and inclusive education environments.
4. Change curriculum language and practice from a medical model of inclusive education based on Additional Education Needs (AEN) to a social model of inclusive education which looks at all aspects of a student's identity.
5. Develop inclusive education strategies based on active participative and engagement with students from diverse backgrounds, which is premised in a student voice and community approach.



STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION

These recommendations would be of keen interest to those working in the:

- Department of Education & Youth
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS)
- Higher Education Authority (HEA)
- Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth
- Initial and Continuing Teacher Education Providers at second level and Further Education and Training (Maynooth University, University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Trinity College, National College of Ireland, Marino, Dublin City University, University of Galway, South East Technical University, University College Cork.)
- Teaching Council
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- School management bodies
- School Trustees
- Education and Training Boards, and other FET providers
- Teacher Unions (Teachers Union of Ireland, Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland)
- Student Unions and advocacy groups

NGOs involved in broadening education in Ireland to make it more inclusive, including:

- BeLonG To
- Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)
- LGBT Ireland
- ShoutOut
- Star Project
- Pavee Point
- Travellers Movement Ireland
- Migrants' Rights groups
- Barnados
- One Family
- EAPN Ireland
- Disability Federation of Ireland



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: The Department of Education & Youth (DEY) and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS) need to ensure its definition of inclusive education includes diversity and intersectionality as well as Additional Educational Needs (AEN), ensuring more inclusive practice, including the definition of inclusive education in policy documents.

Explanation: The findings of the TUTOR literature review suggest that the definition of inclusive education in policy documents is difficult to interpret or is limited in its expression and needs to become clearer. The TUTOR partners analysis of the literature shows that notwithstanding the existence of instruments to enhance inclusive education, there are incidences of school segregation of marginalized students, and or exclusionary practices across the education systems under review (TUTOR, 2023). Widening the working definition to an expanded understanding of what inclusion mean to an intersectional one will help alleviate segregation and exclusionary practices.

Anticipated Impact: Clearer policy will be easier for inspectorate, initial teacher education institutions, school leadership, and teachers to understand and implement in practice. More inclusion will de-segregate marginalised students in practice and encourage an appreciation of the full diversity of students' backgrounds.

Recommendation 2: The Department of Education & Youth (DEY) and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS) should engage systemically with a broad range of education stakeholders about inclusive education, and the challenges, and the opportunities it offers by building an online, guided community of practice with educators and leadership across the country in addition to regular community, parent, and advocacy group engagement.

Explanation: The findings of the TUTOR project illustrated the challenges that second level and FET teachers, and leadership, are having with inclusive education in practice in an increasingly diverse society. Educators identified 'double disadvantage' (i.e., when a student has two intersecting parts of their identity that creates a double barrier to access education – a migrant who is experiencing poverty) as something that their initial teacher education has not prepared them for. Both educators and leadership articulated that they lack the skills, tools, and resources needed in these types of situations. A lot of stakeholders in the wider education community already have addressed and created tools and strategies for inclusive education – broadening the conversation to include as many stakeholders as possible will offer greater insights, possibilities, and good practice. An ongoing, online, and guided community of practice was requested by the participants of the Continuous Professional Development programme. They identified coming together from across different sectors of the Irish education system to share practice and dialogue as one of the most valuable outcomes from the programme. This online community of practice, in addition to ongoing dialogue and feedback from communities, parents, students, and advocacy groups will develop a bank of knowledge and shared practices about the lived experience of these students that can inform policy and practice.

Anticipated Impact: A regular systemic engagement with stakeholders who are working in environments that are grappling with inclusive education and that are successful in providing inclusive education will inform policy makers, curricula, and investment priorities. By sharing practice and challenges educators and leaders will feel less isolated, have more targeted solutions, resulting in a more cohesive practice and transitions in the education system in its entirety. Ongoing engagement with wider education communities, including parents and students will help schools to become more responsive and engaged with the diversity within the broader community

Recommendation 3: Adapt the inspection tools to take into account practice (teaching and leadership) within a human rights approach in schools and education centres.

Explanation: Situating inclusion and inclusive practice within a human rights framework for schools reminds them of their legal obligations to consider, adapt, and change their policies and practices to ensure that students' legally protected human rights are not being violated. Including this as a section to be inspected ensures it will be enacted.

Anticipated Impact: Rather than seeing inclusivity as an added extra, or inclusion as something that is performed during for instance, a Pride or Culture week, positioning inclusivity tools within the human rights framework will see the legal rights of all marginalised students embedded in the everyday practice of their schools and centres.

Recommendation 4: LGBTQI+ Support in schools and education centres – DEY and DFHERIS should continue to develop and update relevant inclusion guidelines (such as the Being LGBT in Schools guidelines (DES 2020)) and make the BeLong To Quality Mark a requirement for all schools and places of learning to support LGBTQI+ students and educators.

Explanation: There is a recognised lack of knowledge and skills on diversity and management of diverse classes related to all TUTOR target groups, with a particular emphasis on LGBTQI+ students in all countries and at EU level. The existing knowledge about inclusivity is predominately theoretical and teachers lack practical insight into how to implement inclusive practices. Additionally, most teachers are unfamiliar with the approach of intersectionality. For example, the Being LGBT in Schools guidelines (DES 2020) provided key guidance for teachers and schools but need updating given the substantial changes in this area since then. BeLongTo have an existing Quality Mark for schools which provides guidance and training for schools as an inclusive community. Making such initiatives a requirement rather than an add on will support education leadership and teachers to have inclusive practices for LGBTQI+ students and educators.

Anticipated Impact: The revised Being LGBT in Schools guidelines (DES 2020) and BeLongTo programme will empower education leadership and teachers with the tools and language they need to make schools and centres more LGBTQI+ inclusive in terms of policies, procedures, practice, and environment.

Recommendation 5: Use the TUTOR CPD programme to inform inclusive education modules in Initial Teacher Education programmes and professional development programmes for Further Education and Training. This can fit within the requirement for modules specifically focused on inclusivity which is one of the 8 identified core elements of the CÉIM standards for initial teacher education (Teaching Council, 2020).

Explanation: The TUTOR project used the research they conducted to find the gaps between the desired and existing state of inclusive education which was then used to create a CPD programme for inclusive learning targeting LGBTQI+, socio-economic disadvantage, and migrants/ refugees and ethnic minorities. This programme could be used in existing initial teacher education and CPD programmes for post-primary and FET teachers. Likewise, the modules could be adopted and integrated into ITE programmes as they exist.

Anticipated Impact: All newly trained post-primary and FET educators will be informed of inclusive education and will have the language, tools, and skills to put it into practice in their careers, ensuring an inclusive environment for all students.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 6: Support the delivery of the TUTOR inclusive education programme in the Education Centres nationwide for Second level and FET educators.

Explanation: Utilise the existing certified TUTOR Project CPD programme trainers to support the roll out of the programme nationwide in the education centres for existing second level and FET teachers to take for professional development.

Anticipated Impact: Existing trained Second Level and FET teachers and leadership will have access to a programme of learning that will inform the language, tools, and schools to create a more inclusive environment.

Recommendation 7: Building on the current curricular changes to encourage a wider understanding of inclusion and diversity issue to ensure that there is representation of the experiences, cultures and languages of diverse communities including LGBTQI+, Socio-economic disadvantage and migrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities.

Explanation: An inclusive curriculum should represent, communicate and engage with students from diverse backgrounds and provide resources for teachers to work with.

Anticipated Impact: This will ensure that the curriculum is inclusive, representing and engaging with the diversity represented in society.

Recommendation 8: Requirements for ongoing professional development by Teaching Council for school teachers and FET educators should include clear components on inclusive education.

Explanation: While current professional development by the Teaching Council encourages inclusive education, we recommend a greater emphasis on inclusive education training given its significance. Clearer components of inclusive education in line with the findings presented throughout this document are required in professional development at second level to support the expressed need by second level teachers and staff. At FET level, while [The Cosán Action Plan](#) (2016) support lifelong professional development ethos by education, Cosán does not stipulate hours or credit requirements, and teachers' engagement in learning is not currently linked to renewal of their Teaching Council registration. Therefore there is lower incentive and supports to undertake programmes of inclusive education to build capacity across the sector.

Anticipated Impact: Existing FET teachers and trainers would undertake inclusive education programmes ensuring they have the language, tools, and skills to create and maintain an inclusive educational environment.

Recommendation 9: Investment in an inclusive learning environment which emphasises a holistic approach of wrap around pastoral care and wellbeing. A holistic approach to inclusion across all of the school environment and community, which is premised in an inclusive care and wellbeing ethos is needed, including engagement with school counsellors and pastoral care teams.

Explanation: Diversity, Equity, and inclusion requires a holistic approach from an educational institution, and can oftentimes require support in the form of pastoral support or psycho-social guidance for leadership educators, students, and families. Staff who are part of a pastoral care team engaging with students, teaching colleagues and families need to be funded and appropriately trained in psychological, social, and culturally diversity needs.

Anticipated Impact: Adequately resourced and trained pastoral care teams would wrap around and support leaders, educators, students, and families alike.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 10: Supporting Education Leadership in its practices (at implementation, resources, and staff supports levels) to be more inclusive.

Explanation: Educational leadership should be adequately supported by the appropriate government departments in terms of financial resources and adequate staffing numbers to ensure a holistic pastoral wrap around inclusion approach that is developed within the framework of human rights. Leadership should also have access to a dedicated Inclusive Education support network or office which they can call on whenever issues arise.

Anticipated Impact: In supporting leadership, financially, with adequate resources, and with a network or body for advisory support, it is anticipated that education leadership will be more confident and able to create and maintain inclusive educational environments, relationships, and practices.



CONCLUSIONS:

Through the conduction of the 3.5 years research study, the TUTOR project has learned a lot about the state on inclusive education in Ireland in Second Level and FET. This documents the policy and best practice landscape in Second Level and FET for inclusive learning in three target areas: (1) LGBTQI+, (2) Socio-economic disadvantage, and (3) Migrant/Refugee and ethnic minorities. Through its research with over 800 participants, the TUTOR partnership has learned of the difficulties that are faced when trying to understand and implement inclusive education. These include understandings, language, skills, and tools. They also involve school leadership, local communities, and at government level.

Through the research we have made ten policy recommendations:

1. Department of Education & Youth (DEY) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) should ensure its definition of inclusive education is up to date ensuring more inclusive practice, including the definition of inclusive education across all policy documents.
2. The relevant departments of DEY and DFHERIS should engage with a broad range of education stakeholders about inclusive education, the challenges, and the opportunities it offers on an ongoing basis. They can do this by building an online, guided community of practice for educators and leadership across the country.
3. DEY and DFHERIS should adapt the inspection tools to take into account practice (teaching and leadership) within a human rights approach in schools and FET centres.
4. DEY and DFHERIS should continue to develop and update relevant inclusion guidelines (such as the Being LGBT in Schools guidelines (DES 2020)) and make the BeLong To Quality Mark a requirement for all schools and places of learning to support LGBTQI+ students and teachers.
5. Use the TUTOR CPD programme to inform the building of a module on inclusive education to be used in all Initial Teacher Education programmes and CPD programmes for Further Education and Training.
6. Support the delivery of the TUTOR inclusive education programme into the Education Centres nationwide for Second level and Further Education educators.
7. Curriculum – building on the current curricular changes to encourage a wider understanding of inclusion – diversity / representation.
8. Requirements for ongoing professional development by Teaching Council for school teachers and FET educators should include clear components on inclusive education.
9. Investment in an inclusive learning environment which emphasises a holistic approach of pastoral care.
10. Supporting School Leadership in its practices (at implementation, resources, and staff supports levels) to be more inclusive.

These policy recommendations, if enacted, will provide a concrete roadmap to creating inclusive education environments in Ireland which will lead to greater social-emotional skills, academic achievement, school engagement, peer acceptance, and sustainable relationships amongst all students and school communities.



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- [ii] O'Rourke, 2015
- [iii] SOLAS, 2014: 91
- [iv] SOLAS, 2019: 5
- [v] <https://www.iglyo.org/resources/ie-2022>
- [vi] Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland: The national study on the mental health and wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ community in Ireland (2024) <https://www.belongto.org/app/uploads/2024/04/FINAL-Being-LGBTQI-in-Ireland-Full-Report.pdf>
- [vii] Ibid.
- [viii] Ibid p.105
- [ix] Ibid.
- [x] Wightman & Danziger, 2012
- [xi] Lynch and Baker, 2005:5
- [xii] Downes, 2020
- [xiii] Smyth, McCoy, and Kingston 2015; Fleming 2020, 2021.
- [xiv] Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017
- [xv] Burke, Kenny and Grummell 2022
- [xvi] Ibid p. 14.
- [xvii] DPER, 2017; DES, 2015; Smyth et al. 2019
- [xviii] Burns, 2016.
- [xix] P.17.
- [xx] P.25.
- [xxi] P.26.
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- [xxxi] O'Gorman and Duddy, 2011, p. 17
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