

DEFINITION – WHAT DOES INCLUSIVE SCHOOL MEAN?

Inclusive education is not a marginal issue, but is central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies.

Inclusion is not a new concept in education. Related terms with a longer history include mainstreaming, integration, normalization, least restrictive environment, deinstitutionalization, and regular education initiative. Some use several of these terms interchangeably; others make distinctions. Admittedly, much of the confusion over the issue of inclusion stems from the lax usage of several of these related terms when important differences in meaning exist, especially among the most common-mainstreaming, integration, inclusion, and full inclusion.

The fundamental principle of inclusive education is that every children should learn together anytime this is possible, regardless the difficulties or the differences between them.

“Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.”

(The UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 1994)

UNESCO defines inclusive education *“as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”*. Thus, inclusive education involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with the conviction that it is the **responsibility of the state to educate all children.**

http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Background_NoteFINAL%281%29.pdf

The UNESCO approach on inclusive education has in its center the idea of **making the marginalized groups visible in society** and getting access to governmental policies and education: *“Inclusive education should be viewed in terms of including traditionally excluded or marginalized groups or making the invisible visible. The most marginalized groups are often invisible in society: disabled children, girls, children in remote villages, and the very poor. These invisible groups are excluded from governmental policy and access to education.”*

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/inclusive-education/what-is-inclusive-education/>

The UNICEF definition of inclusive education focuses on the **shift of values and beliefs**, specific approaches and solutions: *“Inclusive education is not only about issues of input, such as access, and those related to processes such as teacher training, but it involves a shift in underlying values and beliefs, along with very specific approaches, positions, and solutions.”*

http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/education_18613.html

Inclusion in education is an approach once thought only necessary for educating students with special educational needs. Now it is crucial that **all teachers ensure inclusive practice for all students** in their classroom and the wider school: *“Under the inclusion model, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. Implementation of these practices varies. Schools most frequently use them for selected students with mild to severe special needs.”*

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclusion %28education%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclusion_%28education%29))

The vision on the inclusive education is that all children reach their **full learning potential** and decisions are based on the **individual needs of the student** and **founded on evidence**: *“Inclusive education is a pairing of philosophy and pedagogical practices that allow each student to feel respected, confident and safe so he or she can learn and develop to his or her full potential. It is based on a system of values and beliefs centered on the best interests of the student, which promotes social cohesion, belonging and active participation in learning, a complete school experience, and positive interactions with peers and others in the school community.”*

(<http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/Definition%20of%20inclusion.pdf>)

Inclusive education is about how **communities develop and design their schools**, classrooms, programs and activities so that **all students learn and participate together**: *“Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighborhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school.”*

(<http://www.inclusionbc.org/our-priority-areas/inclusive-education/what-inclusive-education>)

The **individualized approach** is one of the key principles of inclusive schools for all and **schools fitted to the child**: *“The purpose of inclusion is education for life. Education in inclusive schools represents the process of learning throughout life in diversities. Systematic orientation towards an inclusive approach is not only a question of children and pupils with developmental disabilities and children with learning difficulties, but also a question of education for life in an actual and natural community made up of people in their realistic diversities.”*

(“A guide for advancing inclusive education practice”,
Fund for an Open Society, Belgrade, 2009 – p. 7)

The practice of the inclusive education is an **expression of a democratic society** and its support by the government is a **long-term investment in poverty reduction**: *“On a quite pragmatic level, systematic support to inclusive education and systematic support of the development of the inclusive dimension of a school, both from the individual’s perspective and from the perspective of the local and broader community, represents long-term investment in poverty reduction. However, from the perspective of social processes, systematic support to inclusive education is an expression of the democratic orientation of a society, a sensitive measure of fairness and a very precise benchmark of genuine social orientation towards essential human rights appreciation of all members of society.”*

(Darinka RADIVOJEVIC, Milena JEROTIJEVIC - “Cooperation between the school and the family in the process of working with pupils with developmental disabilities”, Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade, 2007 – p. 3)

Most frequently, inclusive education is determined as a **process of meeting pupils' needs within the mainstream education system** by employing all available resources for creating opportunities for children to learn and be prepared for life: *"By meeting the educational needs of all children, young people and adults, a special focus is placed on those who are being marginalized and excluded. Inclusive education is therefore determined as a process which makes schools open for all pupils and in which all pupils in a school, especially those being discriminated, become part of the school community, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses in some areas – inclusive education is based on respecting all children and providing equal conditions for all pupils to learn together."* This concept assumes that the school's duty is to educate all pupils in mainstream classrooms and to develop workable approaches that enable all pupils to learn and participate in a school's life and in education.

*("A guide for advancing inclusive education practice",
Fund for an Open Society, Belgrade, 2009 – p. 28)*

Inclusive education is a way of **social support**: *"Although it is frequently emphasized that an inclusive school does not only represent a mainstream school educating children with special needs, but also a school in which all children get suitable support for developing their individual potentials, it is still generally regarded that inclusive education is a way of social support to the learning processes of children and pupils with special needs."*

*("A guide for advancing inclusive education practice",
Fund for an Open Society, Belgrade, 2009 – p. 29)*

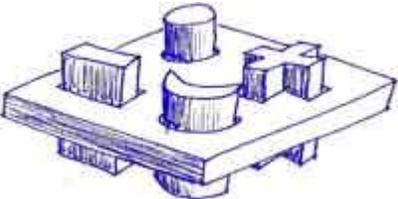
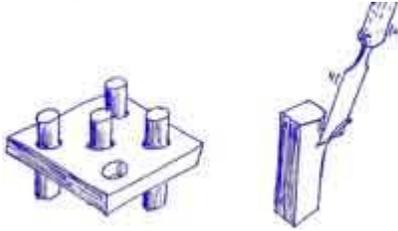
Inclusion is more **values-oriented** term than integration: *"The true essence of inclusion is based on the premise that all individuals with disabilities have a right to be included in naturally occurring settings and activities with their neighborhood peers, siblings, and friends."* Supporters of inclusive education use the term to refer to the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. *"It involves bringing the support services to the child ... and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students)."*

http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues43/definition_inclusion.html

Students with disabilities should not just be educated with non-disabled peers, but these educational efforts should be accomplished in the **child's neighborhood school**, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. This means a commitment to move needed services and resources to the child with a disability rather than to place the child in a more removed or segregated setting where services and resources are located: *"An inclusive education program allows daily and/or weekly time in the school schedule for regular and special educators to collaborate. It seeks to expand the capacity of regular educators to be able to teach a wider array of children, including those with various disabilities, and to expand the roles of special educators as consultants as well as teachers. Also, in contrast to mainstreaming, the primary responsibility for the education of students with disabilities in an inclusive environment rests with the regular classroom teacher rather than the special education teacher."*

http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues43/definition_inclusion.html

The parallel explanation given in the table below on **what is and what is not the inclusive education** shows how EENET (Enabling Education Network) interprets the concept, based on their knowledge of the inclusive education work and debates that are happening around the world:

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS ...	INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS NOT ...
<p>...a constantly evolving process of change and improvement within schools and the wider education system to make education more welcoming, learner-friendly, and beneficial for a wide range of people.</p>	<p>...a one-off project that can be delivered and completed within a short timeframe.</p>
<p>...about restructuring education cultures, policies and practices so that they can respond to a diverse range of learners - male and female; disabled and non-disabled; from different ethnic, language, religious or financial backgrounds; of different ages; and facing different health, migration, refugee or other vulnerability challenges.</p>	<p>...focused just on developing education for disabled learners within mainstream settings.</p>
<p>...about changing the education system so that it is flexible enough to accommodate any learner.</p> 	<p>...about trying to change the learner so that he/she can fit more conveniently into an unchanged education system.</p> 
<p>...an ongoing effort to identify and remove barriers that exclude learners within each unique situation.</p>	<p>...based on following a set formula of actions that can be used in any situation.</p>
<p>...about identifying and removing barriers to learners' presence in (access to) education, participation in the learning process, and academic and social achievement.</p>	<p>...focused just on helping learners to gain access to schools or classrooms.</p>
<p>...focused on solving attitude, practice, policy, environmental and resource barriers.</p>	<p>...just about overcoming financial and environmental challenges.</p>
<p>...a process in which all stakeholders should participate (teachers, learners, parents, community members, government policy-makers, local leaders, NGOs etc.).</p>	<p>...a project that can be implemented solely by external experts or education officials.</p>
<p>...something that can happen outside the formal education system, as well as in formal school environments (inclusive education can happen in learning spaces that are non-formal, alternative, community-based etc. with learners from young children through to elderly adults).</p>	<p>...just a process that happens in formal schools.</p>

http://www.eenet.org.uk/what_is_ie.php

Inclusive education is a process of **increasing the participation of all students in schools**, including those with disabilities: *“It is about the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality. It has the following characteristics:*

- *Acknowledges that all children can learn*
- *Acknowledges and respect differences in children: age, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, HIV and TB status etc.*
- *Enables education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children*
- *Is part of a wider strategy to promote an inclusive society*
- *Is a dynamic process that is constantly evolving.”*

*(“Inclusive Education – An overview of international experiences and approaches”,
In “Light for the World”, Veenendaal, 2008 – p. 9)*

An inclusive education system can be justified according the following arguments:

1. *“There is an **educational justification**; the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and thus benefit all children.*
2. *There is a **social justification**; inclusive schools are able to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society.*
3. *There is an **economic justification**; it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of schools specializing in different groups of children.”*

*(“Inclusive Education – An overview of international experiences and approaches”,
In “Light for the World”, Veenendaal, 2008 – pp. 10-11)*

A school’s inclusive orientation makes complete sense only within the inclusive orientation of the whole education system. Experiences show that **inclusive education cannot be isolated from the general development of schools** – inclusive education is not an isolated issue, but part of the entire course of the orientation of the education system towards the individual pupil and his/her educational and developmental needs. *“In this orientation, the very central systematic question is how to provide optimal education for the individual pupil in accordance with his/her needs and capabilities, and the issue of enabling the pupil to participate in classroom work is the central question at the level of planning school practice. Inclusive practice assumes professional competencies of the teacher, which primarily applies to creating an inclusive atmosphere of respecting every pupil, recognizing different needs and learning paces of all pupils and the ability to create a flexible and individualized educational approach.”*

*(“A guide for advancing inclusive education practice”,
Fund for an Open Society, Belgrade, 2009 – pp. 28-29)*

In the Romanian scientific literature, the **inclusive education** is considered as an **answer to the weaknesses of the integrated education**, which couldn’t be able to stop the marginalization of those children who were different from the general “norm” of the school population.

In the Romanian educational space, inclusive education tends to be identified with the education of children with disabilities; while at the theoretical level there are similarities with the international models – inclusive education targets not only disabled children, but also children facing social or other needs –, the reality shows little evidence on the use of this type of practices in the schools and kindergartens: inclusive education is mainly offered in the so-called “schooling centers for inclusive education¹”, one institution for each county, organized to deal with children with the most severe disabilities; on the other hand there are disabled children who are included in mass schools, but they represent very rare exceptions, due to the costs of adapting the physical space according their needs. If we are to analyze the social component of inclusive education, most of the schools in the rural area, as well a lot of the so-called “neighborhood schools” educate children from families with low income, from one-parent families, from families with one or maybe both parents working abroad or from Roma families.

The definition of the **inclusive education in Romania**, edited with the support of a well-known UNESCO expert, Mel Ainscow, is based on and develops the **UNESCO vision** launched in Salamanca in 1994: *„Inclusive education involves a permanent process of improvement of the schooling institution, aiming to exploit the existent resources, especially human resources, in order to sustain participation of all students from the community to the educational process.”* (MEN&UNICEF, 1999 and Governmental Decision no. 1251/2005)

(<http://www.pentrueducatie.ro/upload/doc/Educa%C5%A3ia%20includiv%C4%83%20%C3%AEn%20gr%C4%83dini%C5%A3%C4%83.pdf>)

“Inclusion means that anyone, regardless her/his deficiency or learning difficulties, must be treated as a member of the society, and s/he is entitled to any available special services which he/she needs in the frame of the social, educational, medical and other services available to all the members of the society.”

(Doru-Vlad POPOVICI - *Elements of integrative psycho-pedagogy, Pro Humanitate, 1999 – p. 4*)

The following definition summarizes some of the principles that guide the **functionality of an inclusive school**: *“Inclusive school is the school which does not select and does not exclude; is open, tolerant, friendly and democratic; it is natural through its heterogeneity; values all students; adapts to the diversity of educational needs and learning and development particularities.”*

(<http://totilascoala.wordpress.com/2009/09/22/stiti-ce-este-educatia-incluziva/>)

The characteristics of inclusive education are also pointed on the web page of the Inclusive Education Network in Romania:

“Inclusive education is defined by the following features:

- *It sustains and confirms that all children are able to learn and need a support for learning.*
- *It aims to identify and minimize the barriers of learning.*

¹ Centre școlare pentru educație incluzivă

- *It is more comprehensive than the usual formal education, including family education, community education and extracurricular opportunities.*
- *It implies attitude change, behavioral change, curriculum change, which should satisfy the children diversity, including of those of children with special educational needs.*
- *It is a dynamic process, continuously developing according the culture and context.*
- *It is a part of the development strategy of an inclusive society.”*

(*Rețeaua de Educație Incluzivă*: <http://www.copil-speranta.ro/?q=node/295>)

The authors of the study “Inclusive education in kindergarten: dimensions, challenges and solutions”, edited in the “Steps toward inclusive education in kindergartens” project², capture the principles of inclusive education which are defining the entire educational system, not only kindergartens:

“Principles of inclusive education at the level of the didactic act:

- *Pupils are learning partners for the teachers, but in the same time they learn in partnership with each other.*
- *Differences between children, as developing personalities, differences between teachers, as adults with socially defined adults and with a rich social and personal life experience, and differences between teachers and parents enhance teaching and learning methods used in the classroom.*
- *The teacher can use different experiences, learning styles and rhythms as a resource for all children.*
- *Relationships between teachers are a resource for learning and a continuous exchange. Current practices offer reflexively experience accumulation which must be shared to all colleagues in order to become another source to improve learning.*
- *Learning is a continuous process which enhances due to the interactions in the classroom and values the acquisitions of each pupil.*
- *Thus teaching is a process that provokes to discussions and group analysis. It may become a process of interactions, discovery and use of previous life experiences, if it involves positive valences of small groups of pupils.*
- *The teacher is the one who organizes learning situations in which s/he implicates all pupils and also the one who values each pupil’s potential, in a positive and flexible manner. Interaction is seen as a necessary coordinate for teaching as it produces learning.*
- *The process of learning is a continuous process in which it is important the way to start and the means to sustain and support. Pupil must learn in the classroom sustained and supported by the teacher and the other pupils.*
- *The learning process is more important than the product when speaking about the development of pupil’s personality and the construction of his psycho-social competences.*
- *The pupil cannot be considered a problem if s/he doesn’t fit to the learning rhythm. S/he is a model of learning, expression and development.”*

(“Educația incluzivă în grădiniță: dimensiuni, provocări, soluții”, pp. 64-65

Coordinated by E. Vrasmaș and T. Vrasmaș, Bucharest, 2012)

² Project implemented in 2011 by the RENINCO Association Romania, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport, with the technical and financial support of the UNICEF representatives in Romania