POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

LEAD! specific LEArning Disorders no more!

Introduction

The "LEAD! Project, "specific LEArning Disorders no more!", focuses on the learning difficulties of students attending European schools of all levels.

The acronym SLD (Specific Learning Disorders) refers to the diagnostic category titled Specific Developmental Learning Disorders, which belongs to Neurodevelopmental Disorders. These disorders concern the specific condition of school skills: Dyslexia, Dystography, Dysgraphia and Dyscalculia.

The EUROPE 2020 Strategy wanted to reduce early school leaving (ESL) to less than 10 % in the EU, and, according to EUROSTAT (Disability statistics – access to education and training), 1 out of 4 people in the EU who face basic activity difficulties, leave the school prematurely. According to EPALE (JULY 2017) there were around 35.67 million students with such disabilities, 13.88 million coming from primary school and 21.700.000 from secondary school.

LEAD! wants to empower and support students with SLD (9-14 years old) in developing the right competences for the adaptive technologies and their use thanks to the support of an innovative platform, MY SKILLS. The learning material will be validated according to the European Guidelines of The Validation of Non-formal And Informal Learning (CEDEFOP) and, at the end of the learning path, students will have the chance to get the European Adaptive Tool Licence. Thus, the project aims at increasing SOCIAL INCLUSION starting with school education and decreasing Early School Leaving (ESL).

The DIRECT TARGET GROUP of the project is represented by students aged 9-14 who have a SLD diagnosis (Dyslexia and specific learning difficulties).

The INDIRECT TARGET is composed of: primary and lower secondary school teachers, support teachers, principals and associations of professors and principals active in the local and European territory.
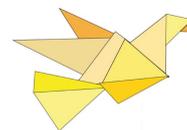
# Project's pilot as a way to lead the way towards Social Inclusion at school

Overall, the project results include 2 key Intellectual Outputs (IOs):

IO1 · THE EUROPEAN CERTIFICATE FOR THE USE OF THE COMPENSATIVE TOOLS - The first Intellectual output of the project denotes the innovative contents as it sets the aim to create an EUROPEAN CERTIFICATE for the use of the compensative tools in order to IMPROVE AND CERTIFICATE the digital computer skills of students (9-14 years-old) with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) concerning the use of the compensative tools in schools for learning purposes and social inclusion.

IO2 · MY SKILLS - The PLATFORM is the third innovative element of the project because it hosts the innovative course, allows European families and schools to create a COMMUNITY and offers direct support through a HELP DESK MY SKILLS where the experts (who will initially be the pool of experts on the project) will answer users' questions. And finally, it allows young people who pass the training course and related exams to obtain the EUROPEAN LICENCE OF COMPENSATORY INSTRUMENTS.

To have the aforementioned recommendations, one of the processes under IO2 included a "Pilot Testing" to help partners assess, test and validate the produced deliverables (primarily the Guidelines and the online learning platform). To achieve this, the Pilot was based on a set methodology applied across the partner countries. By the end of this process, the Pilot reached out to students and teachers (engaging 2 countries represented in the consortium), providing the opportunity to test and provide feedback.
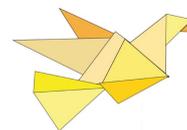
Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the project implementation and challenges and on the input collected from participants, a set of recommendations are put forth to the attention of policy-makers at local, regional and national level in each partner country.

Policy development

- Ensure that the **development of policies, strategies, and initiatives is carried out according to rigorous systems of data monitoring and collection** on their impact on learners with special educational needs. Any process of data collection should be done in partnership with civil society stakeholders and groups that represent learners with special educational needs. Provide adequate funding to ensure that the data monitoring can be facilitated.
- Ensure that each p**olicy development within education and training is approached from a whole-school and whole-community perspective**, so that learners with special educational needs can be supported by all education stakeholders that are attuned to their specific needs.
- Ensure **policy coherence** of any policy development in education and training that focuses on learners with special educational needs with the overarching local, regional, national and European policies and strategies that already exist.
- Mainstream the concept of inclusion across all education institutions' strategies and across the policies of each Member States.
- **Raise awareness on learning difficulties** to forefront the misconceptions and stereotypes and overcome societal stigmatisation surrounding those with SLD.
- **Ensure the participation of learners** with specific learning difficulties and their guardians/families in the development of learning policies that concern them.
- **Ensure that the EU institutions can provide common guidelines to Member States** on the most effective actions to ensure the inclusion of learners with learning difficulties in the school learning environment.
- **Better mainstream the inclusion of learners with special educational needs** as an indicator within the European Semester process to ensure that Member States can receive Country Specific Recommendations which would aid them in closing academic achievement gaps for learners with SLD.
- **Civil society** can be a strong ally in contributing to the inclusion of learners with special needs in education and training. Their expertise, flexibility in providing learning and ability to adapt the learning environment to the needs of the learners make them unique partners which should more structurally collaborate with formal education institutions
- **Promote the cooperation of Member States** as well as of formal, informal and non-formal education providers considering that a truly inclusive education environment that supports learners with special needs can be achieved only if all education stakeholders establish common goals and approaches.
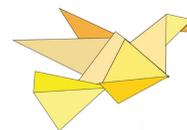
School leaders, educators, other educational staff

- Ensure access to as well as **time and resources for high quality Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses to prepare school leaders, educators and other educational staff** to understand well-being, disability, and learning difficulties. This should be coupled with adequate investment for CPD but also for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to ensure that all educators are attuned to support learners with special needs.
- Promote pedagogical approaches that build learners' autonomy and responsibility and empower them to actively engage in their competence development. This includes the promotion of blended learning (including digital resources, access to libraries, laboratories, museums, community centres, and nature). The pedagogical approach promoted must be adapted to the needs of learners with special educational needs. Learning time and environments ought to be flexibly and heterogeneously organised, while transdisciplinary teaching and learning, cooperative learning and peer support must be provided in the learning process.
- **Support the inclusion of learners with special educational needs** in mainstream schools, with effective support provided by trained educators and other educational staff/counsellors, or health professionals, as opposed to segregating learning in special needs education institutions.
- Enable educators to develop the use of assistive technologies that can support learners with special educational needs to participate in learning. However, they should be prepared to develop them in an age-adapted and transversal way.
- Mainstream education as a human right for all and, therefore, ensure that tools are adapted to facilitate the learning of those with specific and special needs.
- Promote the MY SKILLS Platform in order to ensure a community of educators can collaborate and share resources on how to best support learners with Specific Learning Disorders.

Learners

- **Mainstream collaborative approaches to teaching and learning** such as peer learning, which have proved to be effective in improving students' engagement and achievement, particularly for early school leavers, disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups of society, learners with special educational needs and disabled persons.
- Establish the possibility for learners to co-create their learning process and be active in decision-making that impact their educational path, e.g. by working together to achieve their educational goals, by engaging in student councils and influencing education policies, and by collaboratively deciding on their priorities in learning
- Promote the MY SKILLS Platform so that learners can have access to tailored educational learning material and collaborative spaces with their peers.
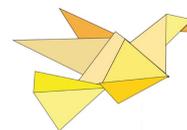
Learning environments

- **Foster collaborative learning environments** that are constructed on peer learning as they tend to reduce disparities. Learners in collaborative learning environments tend to perform significantly better than those in competitive and individualistic ones and that is why a truly holistic approach to learning has to include the principle of collaboration – including for learners with special educational needs. This can contribute to developing the competences of all learners to understand learning difficulties and facilitate their capacity to learn in context attuned to all learners' needs.

- **Facilitate the inclusion of all learners in mainstream education**, ensuring that all learners have access to equal opportunities to access education and training but also to in life and employment at a later stage

- Coordinate the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans in a manner that ensures that the allocated funding for upgrading education institutions considers creating a learning environment equipped to adapt to the special needs of the different learners. Increase in the allocation of financial resources to regional governments is also needed so that the implementation of regional laws on inclusion is ensured.

- Embed the MY SKILLS Platform in the formal, informal and non-formal learning environments, ensuring that all education stakeholders can support learners with special needs within and outside of schools

Pedagogies, resources, associated processes and curricula

- **Improve and make access to affordable digital tools for disadvantaged groups.** Digital tools such as digital textbooks, exercise software, broadcasts/ podcasts, simulations and learning games, supporting a playful approach to learning, can increase inner motivation to learn and thereby (active) learning participation.

- **Rethink assessment methods and adapt them with the goal of promoting the learning process of learners with special needs.** Certain forms of **assessment** reproduce inequalities. Learners with specific conditions are directly impacted as they are often punished for failing to comply with the mainstreamed assessment format.

- Learners with special educational needs (including those with SLD) tend to be more prone to exam stress for a variety of reasons also on an individual basis, and it can also exacerbate certain learners' difficulties. It is argued that the use of testing regimes has an adverse effect on these students and may result in **early school leaving**—not doing well in exams, failing, getting low grades is recognised as a push-out factor within the school system which marginalises or alienates a student and ultimately pushes them out. The existent summative-based environment for examinations should be reassessed towards an assessment approach which is more inclusive, holistic and learning-oriented.
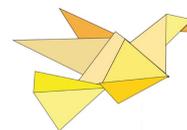
- Adapt validation methods to the needs and the competences acquired by the learners experiencing specific learning disorders.
- Invest in **early diagnosis/early intervention** with comprehensive accessibility provisions and individualised support to better prepare the child with specific learning disorders for mainstream education

Additional resources

Listed here are additional links and resources to support Social Inclusion at school:

- [LLLP - POSITION PAPER - 2021 - "RETHINKING ASSESSMENTS: PRIORITISING LEARNERS' WELLBEING"](#)
- [21st century learning environments LLLP - POSITION PAPER - 2019](#)
- [LEARNING PARTICIPATION IMPROVING QUALITY, ACCESS AND OUTREACH - LLLP POSITION PAPER - MARCH 2016](#)
- [Communication on Improving and modernising education](#)
- [Communication on School development and excellent teaching for a great start in life](#)