

European Agency for the Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE)

EADSNE, the European Agency for the Development in Special Needs Education (website www.european-agency.org) is an independent organisation maintained by the Ministries of Education in 24 European states and supported by the European Institutions (Commission and Parliament). Its focus is on policy makers, experts and professionals who influence policy and practice in special needs education across Europe, at local and national levels. In 2003 the Agency published *Key Principles for Special Needs Education: Recommendations for Policy Makers* based on a study of policy and provision across a range of European countries. This document makes recommendations about key aspects of special needs education policy that relate to the inclusion of learners with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream provision. While much of its focus is on students of school-going age, the principles identified will apply to learners attending centres for education, adults attending further and higher educational institutions and possibly also to adults attending other types of services

The report points out that there is recognition now within all countries in Europe that inclusive education provides an important foundation for ensuring equality of opportunity for people with special needs in all aspects of their life (education, vocational training, employment and social-life) and notes that *inclusive education requires flexible education systems that are responsive to the diverse and often complex needs of individual learners*. While there are different national contexts for inclusion and significant variation between countries in the number of learners in compulsory education identified as having SEN – from less than 1% in some countries, to more than 10% in others – and in the percentage of learners with SEN being located in special schools and classes, these differences are considered to reflect differences in assessment procedures and funding arrangements rather than differences in the actual incidence of special educational needs across countries. This view is endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Science in Spain whose review (2005) notes that ‘Comparing countries, especially on quantitative indicators, is very complex in the field of special needs education and inclusion’ adding that ‘some countries provide relatively precise data, and others only global estimations’.

EADSNE identifies the following as key principles in the development of inclusive policies:

- A framework of law and policy that supports inclusion
- Resourcing arrangements that promote inclusion
- Effective arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and accountability
- A focus on widening access and opportunity

The policy findings emerging from the Agency’s thematic projects concern inclusion, financing and classroom practice.

As regards financing, the report notes the following:

“Funding of special needs education is one of the most significant factors determining inclusion. If funds are not allocated in line with an explicit policy, inclusion is unlikely to be realised in practice. The following are features of resourcing arrangements that appear to be effective in promoting inclusion:

- *decentralised funding approaches that enable local organisations to support effective practice. A decentralised model is likely to be more cost-effective and more responsive to the needs of local populations;*
- *flexibility for schools in using financial resources according to their own identified needs and requirements within the context of national policies.*

Appropriate and flexible forms of support for teachers working with learners with SEN should be the aim and result of policies.” (Pp. 7 – 8)

The Agency recommends against centralised, direct input-funding models for specialised services as these tend to result in what it calls “strategic behaviours” by parents, teachers or others in the educational field and can result in less inclusion, more labelling and funds being diverted to non-educational matters such as litigation and diagnostic procedures. The financing system whereby budgets are bound to individuals (i.e. where funds are allocated to individual learners to meet their specific needs) requires clear-cut criteria to be devised. If it is not possible to develop these criteria, pupil bound budgets tend not to be successful in meeting needs.

It generally appears to be more desirable for funds for special education to be directed to creating an inclusive setting rather than to be allocated to particular students. The report notes that countries with a strongly decentralised funding system generally report positive effects. These systems are characterised by budgets for special educational needs being delegated from the central level to regional institutions (e.g. municipalities, districts, school clusters) where decisions are taken as to how the money is spent and which learners should benefit from special services. Countries with such funding approaches report very few negative side effects and are usually satisfied with their system of financing.