CHAPTER 10

Towards an Identification of Critical Success Factors for European Inclusive Education

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Abstract This chapter outlines a generalisable framework of critical success factors (CSFs) for inclusive education. An initial model of inclusive education and its implementation at multiple levels of the education system is proposed at the beginning of the research process, based on previous studies and a qualitative analysis of inclusive education policies in Croatia, Italy and Portugal. Existing qualitative data obtained from focus groups of policy makers, inclusive education practitioners and school

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principals in the three countries are critically (re)examined by a group of experts. In line with the grounded theory approach, the experts' evaluations are further used to identify new CSFs and propose a policy and implementation framework for inclusive education at the levels of the education system (macro), the school/education institution (mezzo) and the classroom (micro level).

Keywords Inclusive education • Critical success factors • Policy and implementation framework • Europe

Introduction

Inclusive education, when defined in terms of avoiding exclusion from the regular school system and addressing the learning requirements of special educational needs and/or disabilities, that is SEN(D) students, in regular schools (Luciak & Biewer, 2011; Mitchell, 2007), consists of multiple relevant dimensions. In this chapter, the authors adopt Mitchell's (2015) notion of inclusive education as a multi-faceted construct consisting of nine areas which are (re)considered in order to identify the critical success factors (CSFs) of inclusive education at its different levels. The objective of this chapter is to *propose an implementation framework for inclusive education policy and practice based on empirically validated CSFs* from previous qualitative research in Croatia, Italy and Portugal (Najev Čačija, Bilač, & Džingalašević, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Our initial model is based on grouping Mitchell's theoretical key areas into three dimensions: (a) *access to inclusive education* (including an *adapted curriculum*, *assessment* and *teaching* as educational components, *access* as a physical factor and *acceptance* as a social one), (b) *support for inclusive education* (consisting of *support* and *resources* key areas) and (c) the *development of inclusive education* (comprising *vision* and *leadership*).

The *development of inclusive education* refers to previous studies of vision and shared determination for inclusion (Ainscow, 2005; Mitchell, 2007, 2015) and high-quality leadership (Black & Simon, 2014; Mitchell,

2015). *Support for inclusive education* incorporates different resources and processes required to ensure successful and continuous access to inclusive education. It is not based solely on peer and institutional support mechanisms (Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape, & Norwich, 2012; Haug, 2017; Valeo, 2008), but also refers to the role of leadership in evaluation, individual teachers' professional development, as well as structural change at the school level (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010). *Access to inclusive education* goes beyond physical access to education facilities and the placement of SEN(D) students in regular classes. It rather builds upon studies on the adapted curriculum, teaching and assessment (Topping, 2012; Westwood, 2004) which include actual problem solving in inclusive practice, as well as the structuring of a supportive social environment (Mittler, 2012).

The key areas are viewed at three levels of the education system, as identified by Kyriazopoulou and Weber (2009) and further discussed by Najev Čačija et al. (2019, pp. 121–122):

- The *macro level*, that is the legal framework and national resources devoted to inclusive education (Ainscow 2005; Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002).
- The *mezzo level*, which includes education practices at the level of an individual school (institution), along with leadership for inclusive education (Polat, 2011; Soodak, 2003).
- The *micro level*, where the interaction of students and teachers creates the experience of inclusive education at the classroom level (Fakolade, Adeniyi, & Tella, 2017; Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009; Slee, 2011; Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

A visualisation of the framework (Fig. 10.1) is represented by the concentric circles, illustrating the development process of inclusive education (starting with the development and leadership of inclusive education, followed by the provision of support and actual inclusive practices).

Fig. 10.1 The theoretical framework of inclusive education policy and practice. (Source: Authors)

The Grounded Theory Approach to the Identification of CSFs for Inclusive Education

Previous research (Najev Čačija et al., 2019) used the focus group approach, with multiple stakeholders involved, to identify and group inclusive education policy aspects in Croatia, Italy and Portugal. This chapter critically (re)considers the qualitative research results from the previous stage by accepting the guidelines of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which has been widely applied within education studies (Lambert, 2019). Although criticised for alleged superficiality (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005), it is a solid methodological approach to the 'messy' and complex field of special education (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

In this chapter, the authors follow the practice of collecting data in multiple rounds in order to generate a generalisable theoretical model based on stakeholders' and experts' experiences (Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008). At the same time, the authors use the comparative approach and critical (re)evaluation of previous empirical results. In the second stage of qualitative research (conducted in 2018), five experts with extensive experience in education were asked to (re)evaluate the focus

group transcripts (conducted in 2017), based on their experiences and attitudes/values, related to inclusive education so as to identify the CSFs of inclusive education. The authors facilitated the expert group meetings by using Skype software.

Firstly, the experts were introduced to the focus group methodology and output (transcripts) and were also briefed on previous studies. The three hierarchical levels of inclusive education proposed by the authors of this chapter were debated and re-labelled by the experts, although the authors' initial hierarchical design was accepted. In the second round of expert discussions, inclusive education policy items produced by the focus groups were critically re-examined. The very notion of CSFs was introduced into the discussion by two of the authors with a background in business research. Then, the experts *chose quotations from the focus group transcripts* which they believed represented *inclusive education CSFs*. The previous mapping of items, at the three accepted levels, was 're-shuffled' by the experts. Tables 10.1, 10.2, and 10.3 present the experts' consolidated output, along with the authors' (re-)mapping of the CSFs to the initial theoretical concept, including the *identification of new key areas emerging from the grounding process*.

At the macro level (Table 10.1), the experts recognise the significant role of the *national policy makers' vision and leadership*, especially in ensuring the principle of universal accessibility to education and developing institutional cooperation. Accessibility is the precondition for inclusive education which, unfortunately, is practised in a formalistic manner in Croatia. Macro-level leadership is required to create the required level of institutional cooperation as opposed to individual 'meddling', based on the uncoordinated work of highly motivated individuals using an ad hoc approach.

An additional CSF, emerging from the grounding process, relates to *support processes, especially in the field of teachers' continuous education*. The lack of initial, as well as continuous, teacher training seems to be a basic reason for the low level of education system performance in Croatia, as compared to Italy and Portugal.

The grounded approach *at the institutional (mezzo) level* leads to several conclusions (Table 10.2), with the *central role assigned to (school) leadership*. It is especially applied to transforming teachers' attitudes and instilling a sense of professional achievement, as well as ensuring cooperation among all stakeholders of inclusive education. The most important *support mechanism* is represented by continuous education and professional

Table 10.1 Macro-level CSFs

Macro level	*CSFs*	*(Re)mapping to initial key areas*	*Focus group quote(s)*
Croatia	Inadequate professional continuous education	*Support—continuous education*	'Lectures, as the most frequent form of professional training programmes, have proven to be largely ineffective. Topics linked with inclusive education are currently insufficiently addressed. Quality workshops are seldom organised. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that we all have an opportunity for participation in professional training programmes and for professional advancement'
	Formalistic approach and a lack of focus on the implementation of inclusion	*Leadership (institutional cooperation)*	'An adjusted and individualised plan and programme for students with SEN strives to meet formal requirements rather than to implement a plan intended to meet the requirements of students. Work with students with SEN is in general more administrative than being quality teaching'
	Lack of initial teacher training	*Support—continuous education*	'I am highly concerned about the future of inclusion in practice. As a mentor to students, future teachers, I continuously notice their large-scale fear of students with SEN, as a result of a lack of understanding and insufficient knowledge acquired at the faculty. This is one of the reasons why they show negative attitudes towards inclusion from the very start of their career or frequently consider a change of profession. In addition, we fail to educate generations of the general public who are supposed to develop an inclusive society'

(*continued*)

Table 10.1 (continued)

Macro level	*CSFs*	*(Re)mapping to initial key areas*	*Focus group quote(s)*
Portugal	Perception of inclusion in education as a human right and a self-evident achievement	*Vision (access)*	'I do not understand why we are discussing this at all. Is it possible that there are currently people who think in this way? They need to be banned from working with children until they have been additionally trained and until their attitudes have changed. This way of thinking currently results in the ghettoisation of children and that is absolutely unacceptable'
Italy	Cooperation within institutions of the educational system	*Leadership (institutional cooperation)*	'When I get a new class and a new pupil with difficulties, it is normal that I do not know all about this issue. Every difficulty is special and even in the case of the same type of difficulty there is a broad range of differences. Nevertheless, I am not afraid because I know that I can always, within a very short time, get the type of assistance that is required. And that is perhaps the best thing in our education system'

Source: Expert output (as processed by authors)

development at the school (institutional) level, while two groups of *resources* are recognised. At the level of *individual actors*, *internal experts* are recognised as a CSF, while *specialised support centres* represent a CSF in the institutional context, due to their systematic role in developing relevant knowledge and competences. This finding also resonates with teachers' negative attitudes, feelings of isolation and dependence on individual initiatives, as identified in Croatia.

At the micro level, (re)configuration of the initial CSF grouping also emerges (see Table 10.3). *Acceptance* proves to be the most important of the initial factors, with two different forms. The first factor, *'institutional hypocrisy'*, proves to be common in both Croatian and Portuguese contexts. Formal recognition of the need to provide inclusive education to SEN(D) students appears often to break down in the low level of

Table 10.2 Mezzo-level CSFs

Mezzo level	*CSFs*	*(Re)mapping to initial key areas*	*Focus group quote(s)*
Croatia	Negative teacher attitudes	*None (teachers' attitudes; leadership)*	'I am primarily angered and concerned by the fact that individuals are not being provided with sufficient support and encouragement for having achieved an enviable level of inclusive education in their classrooms and for the implementation of innovations in practice. Such individuals could provide excellent professional support at the level of the school. So, we always remain at the school level in classic terms, stuck and wasting our energy. This is a pity, as principals are in fact aware of the importance of inclusion, yet they are not sufficiently determined in the implementation of the required measures and in motivating those who lack self-motivation'.
	Feelings of isolation and dependence on individual initiatives	*None (teachers' attitudes; leadership)*	'There is no support. There are no didactic materials. There is no one to provide leadership on how to start or how to provide a programme. You are lucky if you have an experienced colleague'.
	Cooperation with stakeholders in the education process, primarily parents	*None (individual cooperation; leadership)*	'Despite the fact that we formally speak of partnership with parents, we are currently far from such cooperation. Generally speaking, teamwork is non-existent in schools'. 'I am angered by the fact that all the parents of students with SEN are considered tiring and boring. This is utterly wrong. One certainly cannot generalise, yet I do believe that there is a lot to be learnt from parents. They know all the strengths and weaknesses of their children, and if we listened to them we would be able to very successfully use such information'. 'When I learn or read something new or find out something new through contacts with colleagues or parents, I would like to implement it. Nevertheless, I need to carefully consider how to present it in order to avoid causing resistance, since we are all prone to resisting change to the usual ways we perform our work. However, if I manage to provide an effective explanation, I can expect support from the school principal and this will greatly facilitate my work, in addition to increasing my level of responsibility, as I need to prove in practice those things that I have implemented in my work'.

Portugal	Personal attitudes and feelings of personal professional achievement	*None (individual cooperation; leadership)*	'I was self-confident, yet I made many mistakes and, of course, I blamed others for them. After 15 years I am aware that my knowledge is insufficient and I believe we can never attend enough training programmes. I am referring to quality training programmes, tailored to meet the requirements of the areas that are relevant for schools. Unfortunately, I frequently listen to the same stories and I learn the same "new" methods, since such training programmes are provided free of charge'. 'The first working day in the classroom with a pupil with special educational needs went by as I kept going over all the previously acquired knowledge in my head and that was certainly where I acquired the skills that are required to act instantly and to use different approaches throughout the planned phases of teaching. The continuation of professional development is my personal matter, yet unfortunately all the good professional training programmes are expensive'.
	The role of school leadership in encouraging innovation in inclusive education	*None (leadership)*	'If any teacher comes up with a new idea, the first obstacle will be presented by colleagues who do not consider such an initiative as something that needs to be implemented, as they have not been directly instructed to do so by the management. However, I need to be sincere and say that the management or the school principal encourages teachers and frequently supports all their initiatives intended to improve their work and, being a good leader, he/she ultimately motivates all the others'.
	Focus on stakeholder cooperation	*None (individual cooperation; leadership)*	'We foster the approach that parents are not our enemies and need to be considered as our partners. They possess a greater amount of information about the students than anyone else. What we learn in one case can easily and successfully be adapted to another. In this way, step by step, we develop our inclusive schools on a daily basis'.

(*continued*)

Table 10.2 (continued)

Mezzo level	*CSFs*	*(Re)mapping to initial key areas*	*Focus group quote(s)*
Italy	Reliance on informal learning	*Support—continuous education*	'I attend anything that I can attend free of charge as an employee of the school. I believe it is my duty to focus on professional development and provide my students with all the knowledge that I have acquired. Nevertheless, concerning the teaching of students with SEN, I have learnt more from the experts who come to my classroom than from all the lectures and workshops that I have attended. This concrete knowledge that one can use instantly is truly valuable'.
	Active school involvement in inclusive education	*None (leadership)*	'The school accepts families and students with SEN and it is actively involved in the creation of a positive environment. Huge attention is being paid to working with families and to the development of a network of experts'. 'Students with SEN should not simply be included in the classroom: The school needs to become involved in the identification of its own chances, interests, opportunities and weaknesses in order to facilitate full inclusion for these students. This does not imply levelling and erasing individual differences, but increasing pupil resources, allocating each individual one of several complementary roles and encouraging a strong network of friendly relationships. The school principal and their mode of school leadership play an important role in these activities'.
	The role of specialised teachers in the provision of support	*Resources (mentoring)*	'Every year, regional offices and the Ministry allocate teachers for support to each school, according to the number of students and the typology of the difficulties encountered. Teachers for support are members of the team: they work with us and participate in all the activities concerning the classroom, curriculum planning and assessment. That is excellent for everyone!'
	Specialised resources, especially a decentralised, multidisciplinary network of support centres	*Resources (institutional infrastructure)*	'Support centres are extremely useful, as they enable the use of assistive technologies for specific types of difficulties that the school does not possess'. 'Schools are obligated to ensure that children are approached in a multidisciplinary manner and in order to subsequently determine the type of education that is suitable for them. The school is normally primarily in charge of the educational segment, whilst medical workers are responsible primarily for the upbringing. Teachers need to provide students with modes of cooperation in the fields of education, upbringing and didactics in order to create a positive climate for integrating processes within the classroom'.

Source: Expert output (as processed by authors)

Table 10.3 Micro-level CSFs

Micro level	*CSFs*	*(Re)mapping to initial key areas*	*Focus group quote(s)*
Croatia	Removal of barriers to inclusion, due to the lack of institutional support	*Acceptance (barriers to inclusive education—'institutional hypocrisy')*	'An education system where a parent needs to be looking for a teacher who is willing to teach their child with SEN is not a system, while the fact that such a system is simultaneously referred to with the adjective "inclusive" is hypocritical, to say the least. An education system where a school employee (a teacher, an expert associate, the management or the school principal) is allowed to state that they do not want a pupil with SEN is not a system. It is sheer manipulation intended to persuade the public about accessible education for all'.
	Removal of barriers to inclusion, due to the loss of continuity in inclusion at higher levels of education	*Acceptance (barriers to inclusive education—'institutional hypocrisy')*	'I have always had students with SEN in my classrooms. Inclusion has profiled me as a professional in all aspects: the ethical, professional and humane. Nevertheless, when enrolling in higher grades, my students experience a complete lack of understanding and unprofessionalism, whilst all that we have managed to develop remains absolutely unexploited. Most importantly, both the students and their families "have a sinking feeling"—with their morale down. This is why I have been dissatisfied for years. I am deeply convinced that unless inclusive education is actually ensured throughout the education vertical, we will not move away from segregation'.

(*continued*)

Table 10.3 (continued)

Micro level	*CSFs*	*(Re)mapping to initial key areas*	*Focus group quote(s)*
Portugal	Cooperation with students as a purpose of inclusion	*Acceptance (barriers to inclusive education—'institutional hypocrisy')*	'I do not see any point in discussing the importance of a continuously good relationship between students with developmental difficulties and other students, teachers and professional services. Similarly, I do not see any point in discussing our mutual cooperation and good relations. How can these relationships not be important? Is that not the purpose of inclusion?'
	Commitment to inclusion beyond the declarative level	*Acceptance (barriers to inclusive education—'institutional hypocrisy')*	'There is no point in preparing a plan and programme of work only to meet formal requirements. If a pupil has problems following the content of the classes due, for example, to a sleep disorder, then efforts are made to organise classes during the period when the pupil is active, for instance in the afternoon'.
	Formal planning of inclusive education	*Adapted curriculum, assessment* and *teaching*	'Inclusive education implies huge flexibility both in teaching and organisation of work'.
Italy	Removal of barriers to inclusion due to negative social attitudes	*Acceptance (barriers to inclusive education—'social hypocrisy')*	'We need to understand that the experiences that most people find absolutely straightforward represent an overwhelming problem for children with SEN, unless they are provided with special educational support'.
	Formal planning of inclusive education	*Adapted curriculum, assessment* and *teaching*	'An individual plan and programme is prepared and adopted in advance, so that a child joins an environment that is acquainted with them and they know what needs to be done starting from the first day of school'.

Source: Expert output (as processed by authors)

motivation and support to practitioners at the classroom level or in issues of continuity across the levels of the education system. The same applies to the constant need to formally acknowledge the student orientation of the inclusive education system, which is not especially important if inclusion is actually practised. The second factor, *'social hypocrisy'*, relates to the stakeholders' inadequate understanding of SEN(D) students' needs and/or their (un)willingness to recognise them as equal members of the learning community. While accessibility proves to be more of a universal principle than a factor to ensure physical access to facilities and classes, the *adaptation of the curriculum*, *assessment* and *teaching* are mentioned in the dichotomous context. From the Italian experience comes recognition of the systematic and planned approach, while the Portuguese emphasise the need for flexibility.

Conclusion: A Proposal of the CSF-Based Model for Inclusive Education in Europe

The resulting model (illustrated in Fig. 10.2) consists of the following CSFs:

- At the *macro level*, emphasis is placed on the responsibility of *national policy makers* to develop *vision and leadership* to ensure accessibility as a universal value of the education system, as well as to coordinate institutional cooperation required for universal access. *Support*, in the form of *continuous education*, is required at the system (macro) level if it is to be successful.
- At the *mezzo level*, the central role belongs to *school leadership*, which needs to transform the attitudes and practices of teachers, as well as other stakeholders. *Support* at the institutional (mezzo) level takes the form of *continuous education* in schools. Two groups of *resources* relate to (a) individual actors—*internal experts* (developed within the school or assigned to it) and (b) relevant institutions, that is *specialised support centres.*
- At the *micro level*, highest importance is assigned to *social acceptance of SEN(D) students*, which is distinguished in terms of: (a) *'institutional hypocrisy'* (i.e. formal commitment to inclusive education, without relevant actions and/or implications at the classroom level); (b) *'social hypocrisy'* (i.e. stakeholders' inadequate attitudes and/or

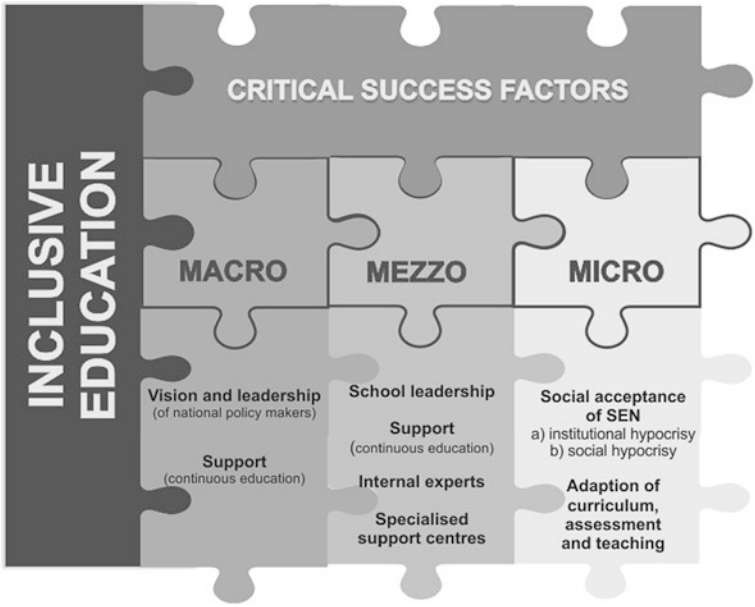

Fig. 10.2 CSF-based framework of inclusive education policy and practice

motivation, affecting classroom-level actions and/or implications). At this level of education, *adaptation of the curriculum, assessment* and *teaching* is identified in a dichotomous context, contrasting the need to achieve a systematic and planned approach to the need for flexibility in inclusive practice.

Further research is needed to verify if the obtained model is generalisable at the European level or valid only for the observed three South-European countries.

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