



## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRACTICE: INSIGHTS FROM THE ERASMUS+ EXPERIENCE

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### **Abstract:**

Special education and training structures are called to play a pivotal role in promoting equality, inclusion, and social justice. Through their actions, they aim to facilitate the social integration of individuals with disabilities, fostering their full inclusion in the community's economic, social, and cultural life. At the same time, developing skills that are functional and useful in everyday life, such as professional competencies, technical abilities, social interactions, and intellectual growth, is highlighted as a critical need. In this context, the educational team of the Special Vocational Education Laboratory (S.V.E.L.) of Achaia undertook a significant initiative during the 2023-2024 academic year by participating in a European Erasmus+ program. The program included two mobility activities aimed at educators' professional development and improving collaborative relationships within the team. The first mobility activity concerned was a job shadowing experience in the French city of Aix en Provence, specifically at the organization "Association for the Development and Inclusion of Youth and People with Disabilities" (ADIJH). This organization focuses on providing specialized support to children and adolescents with disabilities, ensuring their integration into their natural living and educational environments. Through this initiative, participating educators had the opportunity to observe and exchange best practices, focusing on innovative methods that support educational and social inclusion. This initiative contributes to broadening the knowledge base and enhancing the skills of both the educators and the students of the S.V.E.L. while strengthening European partnerships and promoting the values of inclusion and equality at both school and societal levels.

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## 1. Introduction

The primary goal of inclusive education is to provide high-quality, equitable, and fair education for all students, regardless of their social or economic background, gender, cultural differences, or disability (Ainscow, 2020). This vision is realized within the framework of an inclusive school, which must be organized, restructured, and appropriately adapted to meet the individualized needs of all children, without exclusions or discrimination. An inclusive school is not just a space for learning but a mechanism for social change that fosters equality and promotes participation (Kefallinou et al., 2020).

The S.V. E. L. teachers of Achaia, as agents of change, take on this challenge through their active intervention. Change does not concern only their professional actions but also their personal growth, the reconsideration of their attitudes and practices, and the continuous enhancement of their scientific knowledge. By participating in the European Erasmus+ program, S.V.E.L. of Achaia aspires to acquire new knowledge, broaden its educational horizons, and strengthen collaboration among the members of the educational community.

Within the framework of the program, all school staff are committed to improving methods of collaboration and communication, utilizing the specialized knowledge, tools, and networks acquired through the mobility activities. In this way, the school community will be able to discover innovative and functional solutions that enhance the effectiveness of teaching, promote a student-centered approach, and strengthen the role of the school as a driver of social inclusion.

At the same time, shaping an education system that directly impacts the personal and social lives of individuals while also contributing to the creation of cohesive societies and resilient economies is a central challenge for educators (Spiel et al., 2018). Through this process, the teachers of our school are called to act as role models of good practice, integrating the values of inclusion and equity not only within the school but also across the entire educational community. In doing so, our school aspires to serve as an example of good practices, helping students find their place in life, develop the skills needed in an ever-changing world, and shape their future with confidence.

Finally, the results of the activities implemented through the Erasmus+ program will be incorporated into the school's regular teaching practices. The educators will design innovative lesson plans and implement teaching approaches based on practices in which they have been trained, thus creating a more effective, inclusive, and sustainable educational environment.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief and concise depiction of the participants' experiences, as well as the best practices gained through their participation in the European Erasmus+ program.

## 2. Erasmus+ Program

The S.V.E.L. of Achaia consists of 65 staff members, including 26 teachers, 13 Special Educational Staff (S.E.S.), and 6 Special Support Staff (S.A.S.). A total of 105 students are enrolled in the school. In parallel, it operates two main workshops:

- The Technology, Agriculture, and Environment Workshop
- The Independent Living Skills Workshop

Additionally, programs are implemented in the areas of health education, cultural education, and environmental education, as well as a meal provision program aimed at enhancing experiential and practical learning for students.

However, the absence of prior experience in European programs, coupled with the need for modern and innovative professional development, contributed to shaping the specific goals of the Erasmus+ program, which include:

- Enhancing professional skills and fostering a European consciousness.
- Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-curricular teaching approaches.
- Improving the overall educational process through integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and outdoor learning methods.

To achieve these goals, the mobility process took place at the host organization "The Association for the Development and Inclusion of Youth and People with Disabilities" (ADIJH) in Aix-en-Provence, France. The program focused on:

- Observing the daily operations of the organization (activities, student interaction, and educational interventions).
- Discussions, feedback, and exchange of best practices with French educators.
- Expanding the observation model by assuming specific teaching duties.

The Association for the Development and Inclusion of Youth and People with Disabilities (ADIJH) is a medical and social organization located in Aix-en-Provence, France (<https://adijh.fr/>). Its main mission is to support children, adolescents, and adults with disabilities by providing protection, care, and education and promoting their social and professional integration. More particularly, ADIJH is aligned with ensuring specialized support for children and adolescents with disabilities within their daily environments (school and home), as well as supporting their families. With over 200 employees, 9 facilities and services, and more than 300 beneficiaries, the organization delivers high-quality services based on the values of inclusion, equality, and the well-being of individuals with disabilities.

One of ADIJH's key services, SESSAD (Special Education and Home Care Service), supports children aged 6 to 18 with cognitive and learning difficulties. Individualized intervention plans are developed in collaboration with the family and the child, promoting inclusion in regular environments. Moreover, ADIJH manages several establishments, including Aix Université Club, which is a sports center supported by ADIJH, and it offers programs for 3,500 individuals, with or without disabilities, utilizing both outdoor and indoor spaces and the Hotel Restaurant Olympe, which is an establishment offering hotel and restaurant services, providing comfort and quality at

reasonable prices. It also serves as a supportive work environment for individuals with disabilities, guided by professionals trained in both hospitality and social care.

The Erasmus+ pedagogical team members gained significant experience during their participation in the program. One of the most notable insights was the importance of developing interdisciplinary collaboration (Moirano, 2020). Regular weekly meetings and open dialogue proved essential for jointly defining goals and interventions. This collaborative approach promotes inclusion in several meaningful ways. First and foremost, each specialist—whether a teacher, psychologist, social worker, occupational therapist, or speech therapist—offers their unique perspective with a view to creating an individualized support plan. This collective effort ensures a holistic approach to the individual's needs, addressing educational, social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions comprehensively. Additionally, through collaboration, specialists can better identify the barriers that children with disabilities or learning difficulties face and hence propose more practical and to-the-point solutions. These might involve adapting the educational environment in terms of infrastructure, teaching methods, and learning tools. By addressing such challenges collectively, the team ensures that the learning environment becomes more accessible and inclusive for all students. At the same time, educators benefit greatly from the insights and expertise of other specialists. By integrating such recommendations contributions, they can adopt innovative teaching practices tailored to support students with diverse abilities. For example, the use of technology, experiential learning techniques, and outdoor education activities often emerge from such collaborative efforts, enriching the overall teaching process (Hills & Thomas, 2019). Furthermore, the interdisciplinary team serves as a model of cooperation, demonstrating that complex challenges are best addressed through collective effort. This collaboration fosters an inclusive school culture where stigmatization or marginalization is actively prevented. It also sets an example for students, encouraging them to embrace cooperation and collaboration regardless of their differences. Beyond the school environment, interdisciplinary teams work closely with the families of students to build a supportive network (Edwards, 2011). The active involvement of parents not only strengthens the connection between home and school but also fosters a sense of community and encourages parents to take an active role in school life (Bachman, 2021). In conclusion, interdisciplinary collaboration forms the foundation for creating a school environment that celebrates diversity, promotes solidarity, and ensures equal participation for all. By bringing together the perspectives of specialists, educators, and families, this approach paves the way for meaningful inclusion and holistic support for every student.

Individualized intervention plans are a cornerstone appropriate for fostering inclusion in education (Ranbir, 2024). These programs are carefully designed to address the unique needs of each student, whether through personalized or small-group support. By tailoring educational strategies to the specific learning needs, strengths, and challenges of each individual, such plans ensure that no student is left behind or overlooked due to generalized teaching methods. This approach promotes equal opportunities for success and lays the foundation for a more inclusive learning environment. A key aspect of individualized intervention plans is their emphasis on

diverse learning styles. By customizing the approach to accommodate various ways of thinking and learning, these programs create an environment where all students can thrive. This inclusivity recognizes and values a wide range of abilities and needs, allowing every learner to fully engage with the educational process. In addition to addressing academic needs, individualized plans actively promote participation in classroom activities. When students receive support aligned with their specific requirements, they are more likely to feel confident and motivated to contribute. This not only enhances their social integration but also encourages them to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them, creating a more dynamic and interactive classroom atmosphere. The benefits of individualized intervention extend beyond participation; they play a vital role in building confidence and self-esteem. Small, personalized successes help students recognize their capabilities and potential, fostering a sense of accomplishment. As confidence grows, students are more likely to engage with their peers and the broader school community, reinforcing their sense of belonging. Furthermore, individualized support helps to reduce stigmatization, an important factor in creating a positive and inclusive learning environment. By delivering interventions discreetly and effectively, educators can ensure that students who require additional help are not singled out or made to feel different. Instead, support is seamlessly integrated into the learning process, preserving the dignity and comfort of every student. Another significant advantage of these plans is their ability to enhance social skills. Through small-group or one-on-one interactions, students are given safe spaces to practice and develop their interpersonal abilities. These tailored settings foster peer collaboration and mutual understanding, contributing to better social integration and stronger classroom relationships.

As a result, individualized intervention plans also encourage positive relationships within the school community. When educators and peers recognize and respect the unique needs of each student, they contribute to a culture of empathy and understanding. This inclusive atmosphere nurtures mutual respect and helps create a supportive environment where differences are celebrated. In essence, individualized intervention plans are not merely tools for academic support; they are vital strategies for nurturing an inclusive, respectful, and equitable learning environment. By properly addressing each student's needs and potential, these plans ensure that every learner has the opportunity to succeed, participate fully, and build meaningful connections within the school community.

Creating mixed-level classrooms, where students of different ages (mixed-age classrooms) and cognitive abilities learn together with the support of support teaching staff, plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusion (Cozza, 2022). Such classrooms, in fact, emphasize collaboration, diversity, as well as individualized support, with support staff fulfilling facilitative and supportive roles. By blending students of varied backgrounds and cognitive strengths, mixed-grade classrooms contribute to inclusion in several meaningful ways. One of the key benefits of mixed-grade classrooms is the opportunity they offer students to acquire knowledge from one another (peer modeling) (Stuart, Connor, Cady & Zweifel, 2007). Older or more advanced students can guide and support

younger or less experienced peers, thus creating an environment of mutual respect and understanding. This dynamic not only enhances learning outcomes but also encourages the development of empathy and collaboration among the participants. By engaging themselves in peer-assisted learning, students gain sufficient knowledge not only from their teachers but also from their interactions with one another, enriching the overall educational experience. Mixed-grade classrooms embrace and celebrate diversity by integrating students with a wide range of abilities, backgrounds, and experiences. This inclusive environment teaches students how to value and respect all existing differences and safeguards the principles of inclusivity and equity. By learning alongside peers with varying strengths, students develop a broader appreciation for diversity, which is essential for building an inclusive society.

Another advantage of mixed-grade settings is their ability to implement diverse teaching strategies that address a variety of learning styles and abilities (Peace & Donald, 2023). This personalized approach ensures that every student receives the support they need to thrive academically and socially, regardless of their challenges or strengths. By tailoring instruction to meet varied needs, such types of classrooms put forward the idea that all students are valued and capable of success. In mixed-grade classrooms, students interact with peers of different ages and cognitive levels, providing them opportunities to develop essential social skills such as empathy, communication, and cooperation. These interactions foster a sense of community and belonging, helping students build meaningful relationships and creating a supportive, inclusive environment. Mixed-grade classrooms encourage students to focus on their personal growth rather than direct comparisons with others. Observing the progress and achievements of peers in different stages of learning can be highly motivating, fostering a positive attitude toward personal improvement. This growth-oriented mindset aligns with the principles of inclusion, where every student is regarded as capable of learning, progress, and success. By bringing together students from diverse academic levels and cognitive abilities, mixed-grade classrooms help dismantle any possible barriers that can lead to segregation. This approach minimizes the likelihood of students being separated based on individual differences, promoting equality and mutual respect. The inclusive environment created in these educational settings ensures that each student has equal opportunities to participate in learning procedures and succeed.

The presence of support teaching staff is a vital element of mixed-grade classrooms. These staff members provide targeted support, guiding students through personalized tasks and helping them engage actively in the learning process. (Astudillo, Simón & Fernández Blázquez, 2025). Their facilitative role makes sure that no student is left behind and that each individual feels included and supported. This additional layer of assistance significantly enhances the overall learning experience. In total, mixed-grade classrooms exemplify the principles of inclusive education by fostering collaboration, promoting social interaction, and providing individualized support. They celebrate diversity, dismantle barriers, and create equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of age or cognitive abilities. Beyond academic outcomes, these classrooms

cultivate a culture of respect, empathy, shared growth and as a result, enriches the educational experience for everyone involved.

Meetings with parents and interdisciplinary teams so as to discuss student progress and adjust intervention plans are pivotal in fostering inclusion (Graybill et al., 2015). Collaboration with parents bridges the gap between school and home, creating a unified approach to supporting students. This partnership enhances the educational experience by ensuring consistent, personalized, holistic support. In particular, regular meetings with parents allow educators to gain a deeper understanding of each student's unique needs, strengths, and challenges. Parents provide valuable insights in relation to their child's behavior, preferences, and learning styles, which help refine and personalize intervention plans. This tailored support ensures that students receive the specific resources they need to thrive in an inclusive learning environment. When parents are actively involved in their child's education, a strong sense of trust and partnership is cultivated between the school and the family. This collaboration fosters a sense of community where every single input is greatly valued, contributing to a more inclusive school culture. Engaged parents are more likely to participate in school initiatives, advocate for inclusive practices, and support programs that benefit all students. Consistent communication between parents and teachers creates continuity in the support students receive both at home and school. Aligned strategies and interventions ensure that students experience a cohesive approach to learning and development. This alignment reinforces skills, promotes stability, and builds confidence, which are essential components of fostering inclusion. Parents and educators' working together provide holistic support that nurtures students' overall well-being. By reinforcing social and emotional skills being developed at school, parents play a crucial role in their child's development. Teachers, in turn, benefit from parental insights when it comes to addressing specific challenges. This combined effort ensures that students feel supported in all areas of their lives, strengthening their emotional resilience and promoting social integration, which constitute key aspects of inclusive education, as well.

An essential outcome of collaboration is empowering parents to operate as advocates for their children's needs and rights (Grüter, Lütje-Klose, Wild, & Fritzler, 2024). In fact, when parents are well-informed about current and updated educational strategies and their child's individual progress, they are better equipped to secure additional resources or adjustments in an attempt to help full engagement of their child fully engage in school life. This parents' advocacy contributes to a more equitable and inclusive educational experience for all students. Collaboration between parents and interdisciplinary teams also promotes a comprehensive approach to each child's development. By combining perspectives from educators, specialists, and families, such collective teams ensure that the child's academic, social, and emotional needs are addressed holistically. In other words, this inclusive approach creates an educational environment where every student's potential is nurtured and celebrated. Furthermore, when parents feel involved in the educational process, they are more likely to fully embrace any school initiatives, such as inclusive programs or activities. This collective engagement helps build a supportive school community where diversity is embraced,

and all students, regardless of their needs, can succeed. In conclusion, collaboration with parents is regarded as a cornerstone of inclusion, given that it assists students in receiving consistent and personalized support across school and home environments. This fruitful partnership strengthens the bond between families and schools, besides empowering parents to stand up effectively for their children and fostering an inclusive school culture where every student is allowed to thrive.

Additionally, enhancing students' career prospects through practical, hands-on experience during their schooling and linking them with workplaces, such as Hotel Restaurant Olympe (<https://hotel-restaurant-olympe-aix-enprovence.fr/>), plays a pivotal role in promoting inclusion. Indeed, connecting students with the labor market not only equips them with essential skills but also fosters their integration into the workforce and broader society in several significant ways. When students are associated with real-world, hands-on experience in actual work environments, they are likely to develop critical job skills such as technical competencies, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving (Popli & Singh, 2024). These practical experiences build their confidence and prepare them for prospective independent social inclusion. Students gain a sense of capability and self-worth, which is fundamental to their being included in both professional and social settings. Any kind of exposure to workplace environments allows students to build self-esteem and independence. Experiencing success in a professional setting reinforces their sense of competence and value. This empowerment helps them envision themselves as active contributors to the economy and society, while breaking down internal and external barriers to their inclusion. Working in diverse environments alongside individuals without disabilities fosters meaningful social integration. The fact that students with disabilities interact with peers in the general workforce, creating opportunities for mutual understanding and collaboration. These interactions challenge stereotypes and promote empathy, helping to build inclusive workplaces that embrace diversity. Linking students with workplaces opens doors to career opportunities that might otherwise seem unattainable. This demonstrates that individuals with disabilities are fully capable of succeeding in the job market. This challenges societal misconceptions and fosters equality by showing that everyone, regardless of ability, can contribute meaningfully to the labor force. Through work-based experiences, both students and employers gain valuable insights into the accommodations and support systems needed for individuals with disabilities to thrive in the workplace. This increased awareness often leads to more inclusive hiring practices, encouraging employers to cater for the necessary adjustments. As a result, students with disabilities have greater access to employment opportunities, enabling them to achieve economic independence. Workplace exposure also helps students expand their social and professional networks. These networks offer ongoing support and valuable connections that students can rely on through their transition into adult life. This sense of belonging in the professional world not only increases their career prospects but also solidifies their long-term inclusion in society. The connection to the labor market serves as a bridge between education and employment, a critical step towards the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. It actually ensures that students are not only properly educated but also well



prepared to smoothly transition into adult life with purpose, dignity, and self-sufficiency. By linking education with employment, students get empowered to pursue fulfilling careers and participate fully in society.

In total, bringing students in contact with the labor market boosts their career prospects and promotes inclusion by providing them with the skills, confidence, and partnerships required to succeed in the workforce. Such a setting enhances self-esteem, fosters social integration, challenges stereotypical attitudes, and lays the foundation for a more inclusive society where individuals with disabilities are valued and treated as equal contributors.

### **3. Conclusions**

Participation in the Erasmus+ program has been an invaluable experience, offering them opportunities for professional development, improving the educational process, and promoting the values of inclusion. This initiative underscored the significance necessity of adequate infrastructure, specialized spaces, and skilled staff in an attempt to enhance teaching, particularly in workshop-based courses. Furthermore, the exchange of best practices and collaboration with European institutions established a foundation for a more inclusive, innovative, and effective educational approach.

The Erasmus+ program has proven to be a powerful tool for advancing inclusive education by fostering an environment that supports the integration and empowerment of students with disabilities. Through the experiences and insights gained, several key conclusions emerged that have definitely enriched the school's practices.

One of the program's most influential aspects was the mobility activities, which enabled educators to expand their professional knowledge and gain exposure to innovative teaching methods. The job shadowing experience at ADIJH in France highlighted the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. This approach, involving educators, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists, ensures that the holistic needs of students—academic, social, and emotional—are addressed. Such collaboration fosters inclusion by providing comprehensive support tailored to each student's development.

A cornerstone of inclusive education is the implementation of individualized intervention plans. By designing support strategies tailored to each student's unique needs, educators create an environment where all students, regardless of their abilities or challenges, have equitable opportunities for success. This individualized approach not only improves academic outcomes but also enhances students' social integration and self-confidence. In other words, it empowers them to build meaningful relationships with their peers and participate fully in the school community.

The program also emphasized the benefits of mixed-grade classrooms, where students of different ages and cognitive abilities learn together. These classrooms foster peer learning, encourage the development of social skills, and reduce segregation. By celebrating diversity and providing opportunities for students to learn from one another, mixed-grade classrooms promote mutual respect and understanding. Supporting

teaching staff further enhances this approach by offering individualized support that ensures every student is included and empowered to thrive.

Another key element of inclusion is the collaboration between educators and parents. Regular meetings and open communication allow teachers to understand each student's needs better and work with families so as to create consistent, personalized support strategies. This partnership not only enriches the student's educational experience but also builds a supportive community that values family involvement. When families actively participate in school life, it gets strengthen the overall culture of inclusion.

The program also shed light on the importance of connecting education with the labor market. Providing students with hands-on experience in real work environments, such as Hotel Restaurant Olympe, equips them with valuable job-related skills and boosts their confidence. These experiences break down barriers and challenge societal stereotypes about the potential of individuals with disabilities. Exposure to diverse workplaces not only promotes social integration but also helps students build professional networks and gain insights into workplace accommodations. These efforts drive students towards independence as well as meaningful participation in society.

The educational stuff learned through the Erasmus+ program will have a long-lasting impact on the educational practices at E.E.E.EK. Achaia. By incorporating new knowledge and strategies gained through mobility activities, educators are better equipped to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment. The focus on inclusion, equity, and individualized support will continue to guide the school's approach to teaching, ensuring that students with disabilities are fully integrated into educational and social life.

In conclusion, the Erasmus+ program has significantly advanced inclusive education at E.E.E.EK. Achaia. Through professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, personalized support, family involvement, and connections to the labor market, the program has created an environment where all students, regardless of their abilities, can progress. These valuable experiences and best practices serve as a model for other institutions which are willing to implement true inclusion, equity, and social integration.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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