

# Educating Students with Special Needs: A Comparison of Inclusion Practices in OECD Countries

Peter Evans

Increasingly, governments are using international comparisons in education to better understand their own national provision and to formulate new policy directions. This applies both to regular education and to special education, and although the work on regular education has had a much longer history, special education presents a wide range of challenges quite different from the regular education field. Inclusion and improving the quality of education for special needs students are, of course, key policy issues.

The term special educational needs (SEN) means different things in different countries. In some, it refers only to those students with sensory, cognitive, emotional, communication and multiple disabilities. In others, it also includes those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Some countries include, in addition, those from ethnic minority backgrounds; yet others cover gifted children.

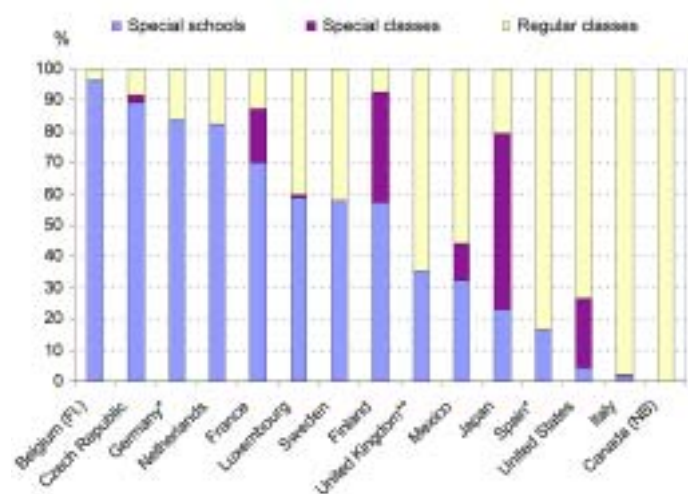
Furthermore, countries vary substantially in the ways they describe their SEN students. At a national level, most countries use complex categorical descriptions to identify children and to supply resources, while others use non-categorical approaches. Thus, if comparative data are to have any validity, some way of taking these differences into account must be found.

To introduce some order into this rather chaotic situation, OECD countries agreed to reallocate their own national categories into three cross-national categories: category A, which includes those students whose disabilities clearly arise from organic impairment; category B, which refers to those students who have learning difficulties that may well be acquired, for example through unsatisfactory experiences in and out of school; and category C, which includes those who have difficulties because of social disadvantage. For all three of these categories, governments provide additional resources to help students access the curriculum. A full description can be found in recent OECD reports.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the identification systems, the educational provisions made available to SEN students are straightforward, although, as we shall see, there is substantial variation among countries as to how they are applied. In the vast majority of countries, all — or almost all — children receive some form of education, usually organised by Ministries of Education. France, which still has some one percent of school-age students with disabilities in provision supported by the Ministry of Health, is a notable exception. Educational provision takes three forms: special

schools, special classes in regular schools, or full inclusion in regular classes. The indicators described in this article are based on these classifications.

Questions relating to the degree of inclusion can then be addressed to each of these categories in turn. The main part of this article will address this issue, first through quantitative data on the compulsory schooling period and second through data gathered during the course of case studies of inclusion carried out in a number of countries.



**CHART 1. Percentages of students receiving additional resources over the period of compulsory education in cross-national category A by location**

\* Students in special classes are included in special schools.

\*\* Students in special classes are included in regular classes.

**Sweden:** Special schools are located in regular schools as a first step towards inclusion.

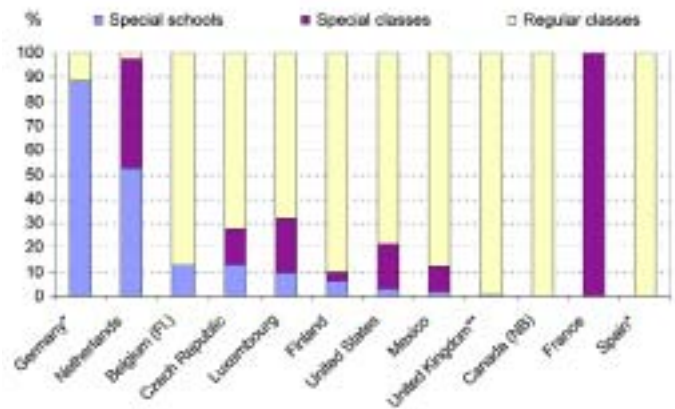
**France:** For the sake of international comparability, French students administered by the Ministry of Health have been added to this data provided by the Ministry of Education. This probably has the effect of slightly inflating the percentage in special schools for France in contrast to other countries that have an unknown number of students outside the education system

## Quantitative data

Chart 1 shows a breakdown of students in cross-national category A (i.e. those with clear organic impairments) by place of education (special school, special class or regular class) for 15 countries – the Flemish Community of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Japan, Spain, the United States, Italy, and Canada (New Brunswick). The light bars show the proportions in special school, the dark those in special classes, and the yellow those in regular classes. It is abundantly clear from the chart that students with impairments in category A receive their education in very different locations in different countries. Thus in Belgium (Fl.) almost all of these students are in special schools while in Italy and Canada (NB) almost none of them are. There are many intermediate positions but for many of these children inclusion is not a reality.

Chart 2 shows the position for students in cross national category B, those whose learning difficulties may have been acquired. Twelve countries were able to provide data –

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**CHART 2. Percentages of students receiving additional resources over the period of compulsory education in cross-national category B by location**

\* Students in special classes are included in special schools.

\*\* Students in special classes are included in regular classes.

Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium (Fl), the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Finland, the United States, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Canada (NB), France and Spain. The data show that for these countries, special classes and special schools are used rather less than for category A students. Nonetheless, in Germany, the Netherlands and France they are used considerably more than in other countries.

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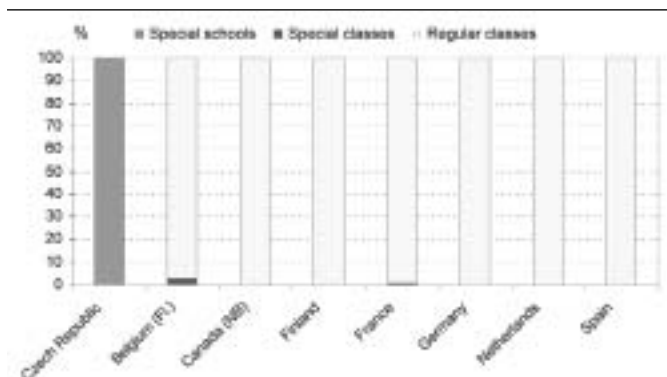
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Chart 3 reveals the position for students in cross-national category C, whose difficulties arise from social factors. This time only eight countries could provide data - the Czech Republic, Belgium (Fl.), Canada (NB), Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. With the exception of the Czech Republic, the other countries almost exclusively use regular schools for educating these students.



**CHART 3. Number of students receiving additional resources over the period of compulsory education in cross-national category C as a percentage of all children in compulsory education**

These data reveal the very different use of different types of provision among OECD countries for children in categories A, B and C. These differences are important in signaling the varying ways national education systems face up to SEN students and in identifying factors that may give students different educational experiences, which in turn may be linked to negative social consequences.

### Qualitative data from case studies on inclusion

While the quantitative data shows considerable variation in provision of service, case studies undertaken during visits to eight OECD countries reveal marked similarities in the process used to achieve effective inclusion.<sup>2</sup> Apart from governments' need to tackle the historical separation of regular and special education, perhaps through the creation of a common legal framework for all students, the inclusive systems in the various countries share many key features.

The case studies (carried out in Australia, Canada (NB), Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States) show that inclusive schools are learning organisations in which teachers are adapting their pedagogies to the diversity of learning demands presented by individual children. And, because schools do not operate in a vacuum, inclusion also implies adaptations to pre-service and in-service preparation of teachers and other professionals.

This does not mean that inclusion can be achieved without the usual special education resources – quite the contrary. But it does mean that the locus of control and the organisation of these resources must change to become a whole school issue. This outcome has implications, especially for funding and training.

One feature of inclusive systems is that schools are more self-contained in the ways in which they provide additional support for students with special needs. This can take the form of:

- Additional flexibility in the establishment of class sizes and in their composition.
- Immediate support for regular class teachers from specialist teachers within the school and from assistants.
- The reduction of teacher/student and adult/student ratios.
- Increased skills in curriculum differentiation and the development of more flexible pedagogies through the shared preparation of assessments and the writing of individual education programmes.
- Corporate curriculum development, including the making of curriculum materials to meet special educational needs.

These strategies are preventive by nature; that is, they help to stop failure and create an environment that avoids the need to teach to the mean. The process provides increased flexibility for all staff, and within it special needs teachers and assistants can play a more general role throughout the whole school.

A number of other issues are also very relevant in considering inclusion.

### The role of external services

Inclusive schools are supported by external services, but attention needs to be given to how these services operate. For schools to respond quickly and effectively to learning needs, they must have the skills in-house. In the most effective inclusive models, support services work to empower the school-based personnel to solve their own problems by enskilling teachers through on-going in-service training. In many effective systems, parents and other community members are also involved. Effective training is a key for success; it is also a major weakness in many systems.

### Costs

The cost of educating students with disabilities in special schools and mainstream schools was examined carefully. In general terms, students with disabilities cost two to four times as much to educate as regular students. Overall the cost is slightly higher in special schools, by a ratio of about 1.2:1. Costs, themselves, therefore, should not be a barrier to achieving inclusion. The main obstacles appear to be at the political and organisational levels.

### Accountability

Accountability is an important, necessary and growing element of education systems. However, if special education systems are not factored in at the outset, accountability issues can create further obstacles to inclusion. Regular schools may be discouraged from taking on special needs students who are likely to perform poorly in examinations. While this may be true for some special needs students, the evidence suggests that inclusive practices in fact improve the performance of non-special needs students. This may, in part, be due to the fact that increased attention to curriculum differentiation and pedagogy generalises to the advantage of all pupils.

### General conclusion and some caveats

This article has shown the differences and similarities among some OECD countries in educating SEN students. It is clear that



there are large differences in the type of provision made. When the process of inclusion is examined, however, there are more similarities than differences. The discussion continues in OECD countries, with equity in education a significant current concern.<sup>3</sup>


Three caveats related to full inclusion emerged from these studies. The first is essentially political. It would seem that at present many parents would prefer that their disabled children attend segregated schools. In governance models, where choice is emphasised, in the present circumstances there would seem to be no option but to maintain some segregated provision. The cost appears not to be prohibitive. However, this decision has to be set against the inhibitive effect such an option would have on reform processes and the practicalities of maintaining the systems of education and special education.

The second caveat relates to students with severe emotional and behavioural problems who present a danger to other students. The ever-increasing number of violent students, appearing at younger and younger ages, seems to be a widespread international phenomenon. If such problems cannot be prevented by or contained in the school, then other forms of provision will be needed. However, the study in the United Kingdom suggests that, with well-structured, consistent and fair disciplinary procedures, rates of exclusion for poor behaviour can be reduced. Similar results have been found in Canada (NB), where the schools and support services work together to keep students with emotional problems in the school.

The third caveat comes from the disabled students themselves, who pointed out that from time to time they would like to be able to mix with other students with the

## EN BREF

Les pays de l'OCDE diffèrent de façons importantes dans la manière dont ils offrent des programmes éducatifs aux enfants qui ont des besoins particuliers, que ces besoins soient de nature organique ou acquise, ou encore qu'ils découlent de conditions sociales. Certains pays, dont le Canada, intègrent presque tous les élèves ayant des troubles d'apprentissage dans les programmes ordinaires; d'autres les dirigent plutôt vers des écoles ou des classes spéciales. Néanmoins, quand on examine le processus d'inclusion de ces divers systèmes, on se rend compte qu'il existe entre eux plus de similitudes que de différences quand on compare les pédagogies et les programmes de perfectionnement professionnel utilisés, l'allocation des ressources, les lieux de contrôle et les coûts généraux.

similar disabilities. It would be desirable if provision to meet this human need for solidarity were made available. 

- 1 OECD, *Special Educational Needs: Statistics and Indicators* (OECD: Paris, 2000); OECD, *Disabilities, Difficulties and Social Disadvantages: Statistics and Indicators for Accessing the Curriculum and for Equity*. (OECD, Paris, in press).
- 2 OECD, *Inclusive education at work. Students with disabilities in mainstream schools* (OECD: Paris. 1999).
- 3 OECD, *Diversity, inclusion and equity: Insights from special needs provision, Education Policy Analysis 2003* (OECD: Paris, 2003): 9-37.

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