Role models for pupils with disabilities

Confidence as a key factor in the education of learners with disabilities

ROLE MODELS
PROJECT

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Introduction

The cornerstone of inclusive education is ensuring all learners achieve their full potential, regardless of their disabilities. One way to promote inclusion and celebrate diversity in the classroom is through different activities that encourage development and influence children's perception of themselves, their peers and society in general. The school, as an educational institution, is obliged to encourage the development of all students, in accordance with their possibilities and abilities and to encourage positive and healthy attitudes towards oneself, others and the world.

All children, including children with developmental disabilities, go through certain stages during their emotional and social development during which their social skills are formed and their social competence is defined. Children's social development includes behaviours, attitudes and affects united in children's interaction with adults and peers (Brajša-Žganec, 2003).

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised the importance of the environment for children's development and psychosocial adjustment. In his theory of ecological systems, he identified four levels of environmental influences on the child: Microsystem (eg family, kindergarten, school), Mesosystem (interaction of different microsystems in which the child is involved), Exosystem (eg mass media, school councils, Church) and Macrosystem (eg education, economy, religion). At the same time, the child is in the middle, and all the layers of the environment, which are intertwined with each other through interactive connections, influence him.

On the other hand, Erik Erikson (1970) in his psychosocial theory emphasises the importance of developing one's own personality and self-concept, the search for identity, the individual's relationship with others and the role of culture throughout life (Woolfolk, 2010). According to Erikson, each individual goes through several developmental stages in which he faces a developmental crisis: a conflict between a positive alternative and a potentially unhealthy alternative. The way he "solves" each crisis has a lasting effect on his self-image and view of the society around him.

Taking into account both theories, we can say that it is extremely important to encourage and properly guide the social development of children, especially children with developmental disabilities. An important aspect of social development is the development of self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence, as an important part of social competences of each child (social, emotional and cognitive skills and behaviours that are necessary for successful coping in social situations). We can say that a person has good social competences when participating in a satisfactory and competent way in groups, communities and the wider society to which the person belongs (Katz and McClellan, 1997).

The role of this guide is to give a brief overview of research and programs that encourage the development of self-esteem and self-confidence of children with developmental disabilities, and recommendations for encouraging the development of self-esteem and self-confidence within schools and other institutions and organisations. In the following chapters, a brief overview of the social development of children with developmental disabilities will be given, with an emphasis on self-esteem and self-confidence. Also, there will be an overview of research and programs at the European level and in the partner countries of the „Role models for pupils with disabilities" project about the topic. Finally, there is a conclusion with recommendations for work on encouraging self-confidence and self-esteem in children with developmental disabilities.

2

Social development of pupils with disabilities

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 stresses the importance of offering all students an inclusive, quality education, so that they can develop necessary life skills, including academic and social skills.

(Aitana FernándezVillardón, Pilar Álvarez, Leire Ugalde, Itxaso Tellado, 2020)

The modernization of educational processes in connection with the introduction of inclusive education, which is becoming widespread in Europe, requires additional resources for social and pedagogical support of children with disabilities, since these two aspects are becoming more and more relevant for schools and teachers. (Olesya Lavrentieva, 2020)

Since in this guide we are focusing on the age group of 6 to 10 years, which is the first and most crucial moment for pupils in terms of physical, cognitive as well as psychological development, it is important to address not only pupils without disabilities in our everyday life interventions, but especially pupils with various disabilities such as for example learning disorders, sensorial disabilities, mental disabilities, chronic illnesses, and autism spectrum disorder, as they are facing more difficulties in the process of their psychological development.

In this first section, we will explore the concept of social development, the challenges faced by pupils with different kinds of disabilities. This introductory chapter will provide an overview of the term social development, the specific challenges these pupils encounter, so that by understanding the unique challenges they face, we can implement targeted interventions to promote their social development, and finally highlight successful theories and strategies that have been proven to facilitate their social growth.

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Definition

Let's start with some basic information: Social development in pupils with disabilities refers to the process by which they acquire and enhance social skills, build meaningful relationships, and engage in positive social interactions. It encompasses their ability to understand and navigate social norms, communicate effectively, demonstrate empathy, and develop and maintain friendships. Social development plays a crucial role in the overall well-being and quality of life of pupils with disabilities, as it directly influences their social inclusion, self-esteem, and overall happiness. Social development involves not only the acquisition of specific social skills but also the development of a positive self-concept and a sense of belonging within their social environment. We will talk more in depth about self-esteem and confidence in the following sections.

But what are the implications of social development? Firstly, social development contributes to the well-being of pupils with disabilities by fostering a sense of belonging and connection. When students feel socially included and accepted, they experience a positive emotional well-being, which, in turn, has a profound impact on their overall mental health. By developing social skills, pupils with disabilities can establish and maintain meaningful relationships, experience a sense of belonging within their peer groups, and develop a positive self-concept. But the social development of pupils with disabilities is critical not only to their general well-being but also to educational performance. Social development entails more than just social interactions. It includes a variety of factors that influence their general growth and development. Studies carried out in the United States of America have shown that students with disabilities achieve better academic results and are better socially integrated when they study in an ordinary or conventional environment than students with disabilities who study in segregated or specialised classes (Alquraini and Gut , 2012). In fact, social development plays a significant role in the educational success of pupils with disabilities. Social skills are closely intertwined with academic achievement and learning outcomes, as many studies in the field show us.
Let's see three examples.

In the study conducted by E. Y. Borisova, children studying under the conditions of inclusion, compared with their peers, meaning pupils in correctional schools, are characterised by less pronounced manifestations of social maladaptation and more harmonious family relationships. The studies also show that there are still difficulties in some other areas like recognizing the emotional state of other people or contradictory trends in the formation of self-image. (E. Y. Borisova, 2019) Nevertheless, it is a good example of promoting an inclusive educational environment.

Research by Aitana et al. has noted that dialogical learning environments (which refers to educational settings or approaches that prioritise and foster meaningful dialogue and interaction among learners) promote active engagement, critical thinking, and social interaction, emphasising the importance of open communication, respect for diverse viewpoints, and the development of communication skills and ultimately can contribute to promoting inclusion. These environments often involve group discussions, debates, problem-solving activities, and cooperative learning tasks, aiming to enhance learning outcomes and foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter. (Aitana Fernández-Villardón, Pilar Álvarez, Leire Ugalde, Itxaso Tellado, 2020)

Lastly, Based on results of the same study, Aitana et al. stated that it could be concluded that interaction-based interventions with an inclusive approach nurture the social skills of students with disabilities (Aitana Fernández-Villardón, Pilar Álvarez, Leire Ugalde, Itxaso Tellado, 2020)

To sum up, when students possess strong social skills, they are more likely to actively engage in classroom activities, participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, and seek help when needed. Effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills fostered through social development contribute to better academic performance and increased opportunities for learning.

We don't have to forget that social development has a positive impact not only on the pupil itself, but also on the overall social climate of the classroom and school environment. When pupils with disabilities are actively involved in social interactions, supported by their peers, and included in various activities, it fosters a culture of acceptance, empathy, and diversity. This inclusive social environment benefits not only pupils with disabilities but also their typically developing peers. It promotes a positive school climate that values diversity, promotes mutual respect, and prepares students for a diverse and inclusive society.

But social development of pupils with disabilities equips them with essential life skills also beyond the classroom. These skills include effective communication, empathy, self-regulation, conflict resolution, and decision-making. Although, as we saw in the previous example, some improvement has still to be made in terms of interventions, by acquiring these skills, pupils with disabilities are better prepared to navigate the challenges and complexities of the wider world. They develop the ability to form healthy relationships, negotiate social expectations, and advocate for their needs and rights.

By recognizing the significance of social development and implementing effective strategies, educators, peers and the supporting network can create environments that support the development of pupils with disabilities as a whole, enabling them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

When we talk about pupils, in developmental psychology we usually refer to two main characters: Piaget and Vygotsky. This guide will shortly explore Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, since it better describes the development of social skills of pupils. (for further explanation please refer to the bibliography).

Let's have a look at some statements of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory:

▶ Human development is a socially mediated process in which children acquire cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society.

▶ The interactions with others significantly increase not only the quantity of information and the number of skills a child develops, it also affects the development of higher-order mental functions such as formal reasoning.

▶ The importance of cultural and social context for learning.

Cognitive development stems from social interactions from guided learning within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as children and their partner's co-construct knowledge.

▶ The environment in which children grow up will influence how they think and what they think about.

▶ According to Vygotsky (1978), much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor. The tutor may model behaviours and/or provide verbal instructions for the child. Vygotsky refers to this as cooperative or collaborative dialogue. The child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (often the parent or teacher) and then internalises the information, using it to guide or regulate their performance.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is valuable in understanding how social interaction and cultural context play a role in human development. It emphasises collaborative learning and guidance from knowledgeable individuals, showing how children gain knowledge and cultural understanding through social interactions and development. The concept of the zone of proximal development or ZPD, refers to the range of tasks or skills that a child is not yet able to accomplish independently, but can successfully achieve with guidance and support from a more knowledgeable individual. It shows the potential for learning and cognitive growth when children engage in activities with more capable peers or tutors. This theory has practical implications for educators and parents, highlighting the importance of creating supportive social environments and providing appropriate scaffolding to facilitate children's learning and development.

As we can see, role modelling has been studied already over the last 100 years and is a fundamental element when talking about development and especially social development.

Barriers

It is necessary to mention not only the social development in general for pupils with disabilities, but also the barriers they may face during the process.
For pupils with disabilities, social development may present unique challenges and complexities. The nature of their disabilities, such as learning disorders, deafness, mental disabilities, chronic illnesses, or autism, can significantly impact their social interactions and communication abilities. They may face barriers such as difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication, limited social opportunities, sensory sensitivities, and social stigmatisation. For instance, individuals with learning disorders may struggle with social cues, making it difficult for them

to initiate or maintain conversations. Deaf pupils may face barriers in communication and may require specialised support such as sign language interpreters. Those with mental disabilities may experience difficulties in understanding social norms and building relationships. Chronic illnesses can lead to frequent absences, limiting opportunities for peer interaction. Autism spectrum disorder can impact social communication and the ability to understand social cues. These challenges can result in feelings of isolation, low self-confidence, and a sense of being excluded from social interactions. It is therefore necessary to know exactly what kind of disability we are dealing with, and to know the pupils' needs, in order to aim for specific interventions. About the data that are known:

It is known that there are between 93 and 150 million children living with a disability and, according to the Learning Generation report, in low- and middle-income countries the number of children with disabilities who don't go to school reaches 33 million (Grant Lewis, 2019). Furthermore, children with disabilities are less likely to complete primary, secondary and higher education than children without disabilities.

In every country in the world, people with disabilities have lower literacy rates than people without disabilities (Singal, 2015; UIS, 2018; United Nations, 2018). There is also a difference based on the nature of the disability, that is, the level of illiteracy is higher in children with visual impairment, multiple or mental disorders compared to children with motor disabilities (Singal, 2015).

A special attention goes to girls with disabilities, who are penalised even more because of their gender (IEU, 2018). Generally, disability tends to aggravate social inequalities (for example, poverty or place of residence).

Finally, we have to consider that there are many obstacles that prevent children and young people with disabilities attending a conventional school. The first one for example is to identify students with disabilities due to the prejudices and social

attitudes. Obsolete and inadequate data complicate effective educational planning and hinder decision-making and resource allocation (GPE, 2018). In addition, countries use different measurements, methods and definitions to classify disabilities (GPE, 2018; Price, 2018). Moreover, the lack of trained teachers: in some schools, teachers don't have the necessary skills to know what necessities pupils with disabilities have. Knowing all the information about inclusive education has to be a compulsory subject for the teachers. We have also to consider the adaptation of the materials at the school: it is important that the infrastructures and materials that teachers use in their classes are accessible for all the students. Finally, the other obstacle that we know is assessing learning. There isn't much data on the learning outcomes of pupils with disabilities. Examinations and tests rarely make accommodations for these students putting them at a disadvantage.

All this is particularly true in rural areas, where increased levels of poverty, poor services, and recurrent infrastructure failings aggravate these existing problems for children with disabilities (SADPD, 2012).

3

Confidence and self-esteem as an important factor of development and social inclusion

It's common knowledge that self-esteem and self-confidence are essential to the success of children and the future adults they become. When children gain confidence in themselves and their abilities, they become more independent and more receptive to learning. Believing in oneself and, above all, in one's abilities helps them to deal better with certain situations, whether they are related to the acquisition of new skills or to coping better with certain social situations.

What is self-esteem ?

The Larousse dictionary of psychology defines self-esteem as the more or less favourable attitude towards oneself, the way in which one considers oneself, the respect one has for oneself, the appreciation of one's own value in a given field (Larousse, 2016)

Self-esteem is therefore the opinion we have of ourselves, which can be positive or negative and which is influenced both by the perception we have of our own abilities and by the image reflected back to us by those around us, whether consciously or not.

Self-esteem can vary depending on the context (at school, at home, during specific activities, whether sporting or not, etc.) and the period in the child's life. Children can therefore describe themselves in different ways depending on the context and whether their environment is safe or not. They may, for example, say at home when doing their homework: "I'm too stupid and I don't understand anything" because they need to be reassured of their abilities at that particular moment, or say when playing a board game: "I'm the best in the world" because, at the time, a possible victory gives them a feeling of strength and competence.

Self-esteem obviously influences self-confidence. Although these two terms are often considered to be similar or even synonymous, there is a difference between them, even though there is obviously a real correlation between them.
While self-esteem is, as we said earlier, an awareness of one's personal value, strengths and weaknesses, self-confidence is a belief in one's skills and ability to succeed.

Having good self-esteem reinforces the feeling of confidence in one's own abilities and allows you to feel sufficiently equipped to face certain challenges.

What factors influence self-esteem ?

Research shows that self-esteem is built up from the very first years of life (Orth, U., Erol, R. Y., & Luciano, E. C., 2018). Parents are therefore an essential factor in shaping the child's positive or negative self-image. The attachment relationship with the parent lays the foundations for self-esteem, making it possible to understand that even if they fail, children will always be helped and loved by an adult. The child's selfesteem is built both by this bond of attachment and by the reassuring framework of listening and acceptance provided by the parents (Harris MA, Donnellan MB, Guo J, McAdams DP, Garnier-Villarreal M, Trzesniewski KH., 2017).

The attachment relationship with parents influences children's social relationships. Children get used to being able to express their emotions and needs without judgement in front of an adult who is open to discussion. Children who benefit from a secure attachment relationship are better able to manage and accept their emotions. They also learn to deal with discussion and the opinions of others. "This ability to manage emotions enables children with secure attachment

relationships to form more positive social relationships. For example, these children have more social skills towards their peers and therefore more friendly relationships" (Educofamille, 2022). Social relationships also have a considerable influence on self-esteem. The research (Harris, M. A., & Orth, U., 2020) shows that children have a better selfimage when they are accepted and integrated into a group and have positive relationships with others.
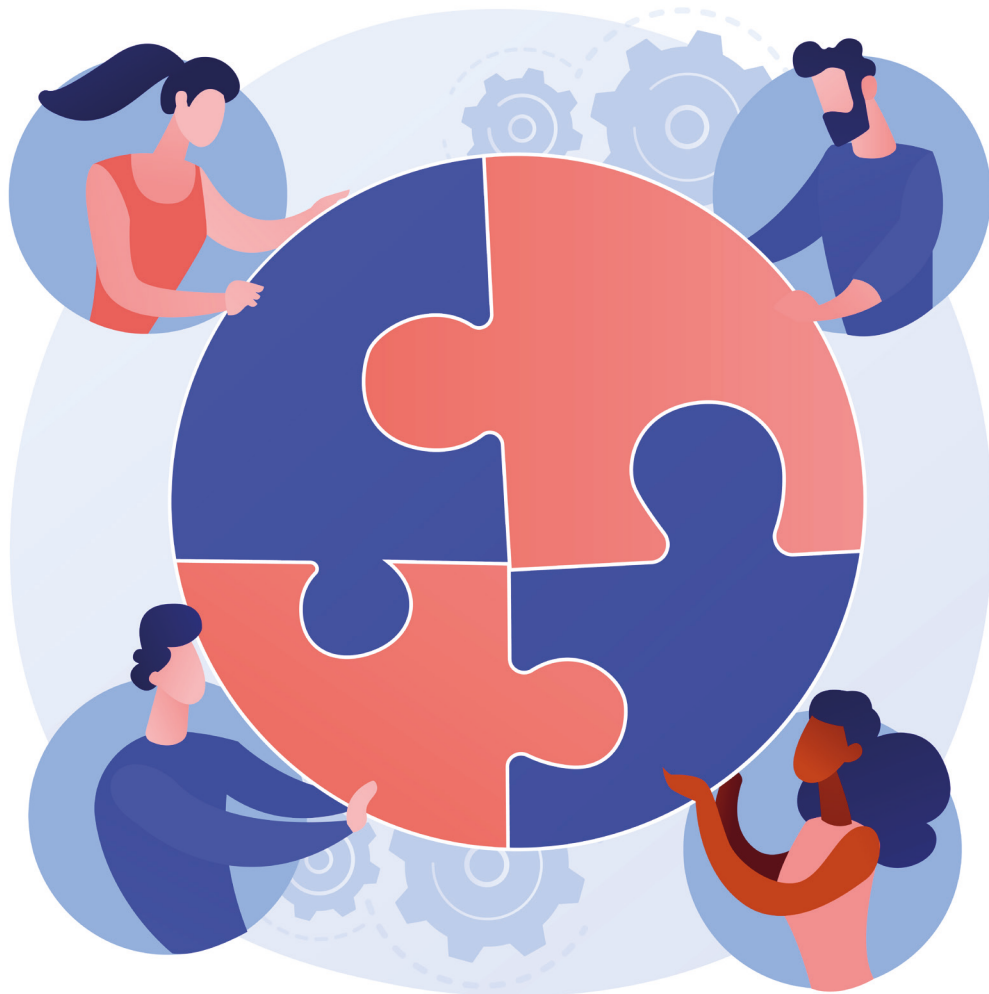

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While these two factors, attachment and social relationships, are of considerable importance in building self-esteem, other factors can also influence it. Successes and failures, for example, contribute to changes in self-esteem, as do the many external influences (the media, social networks, fashion, etc.).

The consequences of low self-esteem

The level of self-esteem which, as we saw earlier, is intrinsically linked to the child's self-confidence, influences the degree of commitment to new experiences such as new learning or unfamiliar social situations. It also influences their level of perseverance, because a child who doesn't feel up to overcoming what they see as a challenge, or even an ordeal at times, is more likely to give up, thinking that they don't have the ability to do so.

This tendency to give up in the face of difficulties is a vicious circle because it seems to confirm to the child that they are not as capable or as strong as the other children with whom he/she inevitably compares himself. Low self-esteem tends to lead to a real fear of failure. These children tend to underestimate their potential out of fear of failure, and so they often adopt an avoidance strategy when faced with new things that could represent a potential failure for them.

Children with low self-esteem and, as a corollary, very low self-confidence also experience difficulties in affirming themselves and therefore frequently have interpersonal difficulties. As a result, they encounter obstacles to their integration into a social group. Children with low self-confidence are troubled by the slightest disapproval (or what they consider to be the slightest disapproval). Most of the time, these children are shy and uncomfortable in front of a group, and tend to avoid social contact. What's more, these children often don't dare to assert themselves or stand up for themselves in the event of difficulty with a third party. These social difficulties often lead to negative emotions such as anxiety, anger and sadness, which have repercussions on the emerging adult.

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Good self-esteem is therefore an essential factor in personal well-being. Research (Harris MA, Donnellan MB, Guo J, McAdams DP, Garnier-Villarreal M, Trzesniewski KH., 2017) shows that children with a positive view of themselves are more aware of their potential and abilities, and are therefore more likely to dare to face challenges and tackle new things. This makes it easier for them to develop rewarding social relationships, facilitates learning at school and contributes to their psychological wellbeing.

How to boost children's self-esteem and confidence?

Every child is different and does not have the same background or environment. So there is no universal solution for boosting self-esteem. However, there are strategies that can be used to help children realise their potential.

▶ Show the child that love has no conditions and is not determined by appearance or actions. They are loved for who they are, not for what they do.

▶ Highlight your child's new skills (whether they are significant or not), but don't overdo the compliments or make them systematic, as this would diminish their value in the child's eyes.

▶ Emphasise effort rather than success.

▶ Help them to recognise their limits and weaknesses, while encouraging them to overcome them.

▶ Show them that mistakes and failure are part of life and that one mistake is not insurmountable.

▶ Give your child responsibilities (housework, shopping, etc.) or encourage them to help others so that they feel useful and proud of it.

▶ Help your child to set achievable goals that are suited to him or her.

▶ Avoid comparisons with other children, whether positive or negative.

▶ In the event of problematic behaviour, focus on the behaviour as such rather than on the person.

This is obviously not an exhaustive list, and there are still many possibilities, but it already constitutes an essential basis for boosting your children's self-esteem. As we said earlier, self-esteem and self-confidence are not innate; they are built up step by step through the child's family, social and school environment. Self-confidence is built by developing a sense of inner security and knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses. Positive self-esteem ensures that children overcome their fear of failure, are able to rise to challenges and enjoy undeniable psychological well-being.

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4

How to increase/ support confidence and self-esteem of pupils with disabilities

Research at the European and World level

In the past thirty years, there has been an increase in the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education system (Webster and Carter, 2007) in Europe and the world, where children with mild developmental disabilities have been integrated into regular schools since 1980. The consequence of insufficient stimulation of social interaction and the inclusion of children with disabilities in peer groups can be seen in research results that show how "integrated" students with developmental disabilities often fail to establish positive relationships with their peers (Koster, Jan Pijl, Nakken and Van Houten, 2010; Guralnik et al., 2007; Miller, Cooke, Test, & White, 2003).

Research on the positive impact of inclusion

In contrast, there are examples of establishing positive peer interactions in cases where children with intellectual disabilities (ID) are integrated among their peers from an early age (Siperstein and Leffert, 1997; Kemp and Carter, 2002; Hall and McGregor, 2000; Cutts and Sigafoos, 2001). Research carried out in Australia, where the involvement of children regardless of the degree of developmental difficulties is effective, brings very encouraging results. Within the educational system, Kemp and Carter (2002) found no difference in social status within the classroom between students with moderate intellectual disabilities integrated into regular elementary school classes and typical students. The authors note that this may be a consequence of the early integration of children with intellectual disabilities who participated in the research. From an early age, they were encouraged to learn social skills in normalised conditions, i.e. among other children. It is assumed that these

children were better prepared for integration into regular schools than children with developmental disabilities, who in numerous other studies have been found to have a worse social status in class than their peers.

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A large number of researches (Kemp and Carter, 2002) indicate that the interaction of children with developmental disabilities with their peers, whose development is normal, has a positive influence on the acquisition of academic, functional and social skills, and also contributes to the increase of social competence, the achievement of goals in education, friendship development and improving the quality of life of students with intellectual disabilities.

Also, many studies (Berndt and Perry, 1986; Parker and Asher, 1993; Heiman, 2000; Fortlouis-Wood, 2008; Estell, Jones, Pearl, and Van Acker, 2009) have shown that the establishment or absence of strong ties with peers affects overall psychosocial development of children with and without developmental disabilities. Children first make friends in kindergarten, and later in school.

On the other hand, in the results of his research, Schatz (1987) shows that families of children with developmental disabilities are much more oriented towards their immediate and extended family than towards specific friends and acquaintances.

Research on the social development of students with developmental disabilities

Only the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in the conditions of regular upbringing and education does not automatically result in an increase in social interactions between children with disabilities and typical peers (Kemp and Carter, 2002 according to Carter and Hughes, 2005 according to Meadan and Monda Amaya, 2008 according to Terpstra and Tamura, 2008 according to Žic and Ljubas, 2013). However, the importance of a positive social environment that provides opportunities for social interaction and encourages the development of friendship between children with developmental disabilities and peers is not in doubt (Solish, Perry and Minnes, 2010, according to Carter and Hughes, 2005, according to Žic and Ljubas, 2013). Interventions should be aimed, on the one hand, at increasing the social competence of children with developmental disabilities, which would raise the quality of social interactions, and on the other hand at creating a socially positive environment in which social interactions will be encouraged (Žic and Ljubas, 2013).

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Programs and activities to encourage social development

Researchers and education experts have recently recognized the importance of promoting health and social and emotional competencies, especially in younger adolescents, through school-based programs (Maurer, Brackett & Plain, 2004). The most recent review of programs for social and emotional learning based on the school curriculum is provided by Payton et al. (2008), summarising the results of 317 studies of the impact of SEU on students of all ages, from elementary to secondary schools, in which a total of 324,303 students participated. The authors find positive effects of SEU in students without and with emotional and behavioural difficulties, in racially and ethnically diverse student environments, as well as in urban, suburban and rural environments and different age groups. They conclude that SEU programs improve socio-emotional skills, improve students' attitudes about themselves

and others, and increase the sense of connection to school (education), encourage prosocial behaviour and academic performance, and reduce emotional difficulties and problematic behaviours. Research in the last 10-15 years shows that social and emotional learning programs represent a concrete approach to reducing problematic behaviours in children and young people, while simultaneously promoting their social adjustment and academic success.

Every child tries to show their emotions in the best possible way, the one understandable to the environment, but some children, including those with developmental difficulties, do not know how to show emotions in an adequate way, and this greatly limits their communication with others, and also affects the development of self-esteem and to creating a negative self-image. Research has shown that physical exercise has a positive effect on the overall development of children with disabilities, and thus on social development. The benefits of engaging in kinesiology activities are manifold, especially for children with developmental disabilities - regularly engaging in kinesiology activities can reduce or slow down theonset of health complications. Furthermore, the results showed that physical exercise helps children in the development of self-confidence, socialisation and communication with other children, the development of trust in others, compassion for others, and they believe that their children are much more satisfied after training (Križan, 2018).

Also, social skills training is certainly a suitable strategy for social inclusion in the long run, but at the same time it is necessary to use strategies that work in the short term, but can still support students and help them achieve their main goal - integration into a community of fellow students who accept students with such deficits with all its peculiarities. Social skills training offers a holistic approach to help, a way of solving problems, which certainly goes hand in hand with individually determined strategies for overcoming and making up for deficits.

Recommendations for encouraging the social development of students with developmental disabilities

In order to encourage the social development of children with developmental disabilities, it is necessary to use one of the following methods: create established, predictable routines that create a sense of security in children, encourage children to participate, use positive reinforcement - a smile without words or a touch can be more effective than loud praise in front of everyone, focus on the effort, not the outcome - it is very important for a child with developmental difficulties to acknowledge the effort and motivation, not the final product, give clear instructions - children must know what is expected of them, and the rules that apply should be clear and children should know and understand them (Daniels and Stafford, 2003).

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Research in partners' countries

Croatia

In the Republic of Croatia, and according to the valid laws and regulations (Law on Education, Ordinance on Primary and Secondary School Education and Education of Students with Developmental Difficulties), the education of each student is based on the principles of acceptance of the diversity of students, acceptance of different peculiarities of student development , ensuring the conditions and support for achieving the maximum development of the potential of each individual student, equalising the opportunities to achieve the highest possible level of education and ensuring the upbringing and education of students as close as possible to their place of residence. Students with developmental disabilities are those students whose abilities in interacting with factors from the environment limit their full, effective and equal participation in the educational process with other students, resulting from physical, mental, intellectual, sensory impairments and dysfunctions or combinations of several types of impairments and disorders.

Inclusive education is based on the right to quality education of all students equally, which means that it enables children/students with disabilities to participate and cooperate with other children/students, according to their abilities and possibilities and interests. Therefore, it requires the creation of conditions in our schools to meet the different educational needs of each student and allows all students to learn together. Instead of adapting students to the educational system, emphasis is placed on creating changes in the educational system, so that the system is appropriate for the educational needs of each student (Guidelines for working with students with disabilities, 2021). In this way, the overall development of the student is encouraged, physical, mental, emotional and social.

Relevant research in Croatia

The results of research on this issue in the world completely agree with the results of research in Croatia (Zovko, 1980; Stančić, 1988; Stančić, 1990; Nazor and Nikolić, 1991; Sekulić-Majurec, 1997; Žic, 2000; Žic and Igrić, 2001; Žic , 2002), which indicate the importance of social integration, as a necessary component of the educational program for students with developmental disabilities. Although research in Croatia shows that children with developmental disabilities are mostly rejected by their peers without disabilities (Nazor and Nikolić, 1991; Žic, 2000), the interesting finding of Žic and Igrić (2001) is that children with developmental disabilities in younger elementary school age, despite not being accepted by their peers, have the same experience of satisfying relationships with their peers as their peers. The authors assume that cognitive immaturity contributes to an unrealistic assessment of their own relationships with peers, thereby protecting children from unpleasant encounters with negative peer relationships.

An early support system protects the family and society from numerous undesirable events, e.g. breakup of the family, psychosomatic and neurotic disorders in parents, reduction of their working capacity, institutionalisation of the child, etc. (Ljubešić, 2009). Strengthening parental self-confidence and competence through the processes of education and counselling is one of the ways in which the child's well-being is achieved by including other important people in the process of early intervention, because parents who have more knowledge and skills can more effectively encourage the growth and development of their child (Mejnemer, 1998). In the developed countries of the world, early intervention always includes the family, because the child's development mostly takes place in the family environment. For this reason, the modern understanding of early intervention takes into account procedures directed towards the child, as well as procedures directed at the family, its adaptation to the newly created situation and the ways in which family members will optimally encourage the child's development.

Programme and activities for encouraging social development

As part of a series of opportunities to remove obstacles to learning and participation of all children, therapeutic riding is one of the contributions that promotes social development and the quality of adaptation of children with developmental disabilities.

Therapeutic horseback riding has a positive effect on the social development of children with developmental disabilities, encourages the development of a good relationship with oneself, others and the community, as well as socially acceptable forms of behaviour. Their findings are confirmed by the results of research on the individual and group level of the six included children, as well as the judgments and opinions of 66 parents and volunteers, who point out that therapeutic riding contributes to the socialisation, personalization and emotional development of children, provides optimal and life-long adaptation of the child to his needs, wishes and possibilities (Buljubasic-Kuzmanović, 2017). Other studies have shown that therapeutic riding as a form of rehabilitation for children with developmental disabilities has a great impact on the development of social skills needed to establish quality relationships with other people. Therapeutic riding programs have a positive effect on the acquisition, improvement and confirmation of social skills and on the emotional development of children with developmental disabilities, especially in regulating their behaviour, controlling emotions and developing social sensitivity for other people. In this way, the child is enabled to develop independence in the social and emotional sphere and is additionally prepared for functional integration in his social environment (Đuretić, 2015). The program of therapeutic riding is usually carried out in groups adapted to the rider's abilities and age. It is desirable that the group gets to know each other and exchange certain experiences. In this way, there is interaction between the group of riders, their connection in terms of the development of certain social relationships.

A good instructor of therapeutic riding will direct and develop experiences in a group such as riding together, love for animals, the possibility of getting to know each other better, expressing the individual and his abilities. In the group, the interaction between riders, program managers, children's parents and other stakeholders of the therapeutic program is also important. The connection of the group is visible in the common specific problems related to people with developmental disabilities that they encounter in everyday life and rehabilitation.

As people with disabilities, especially children, are attached to their parents, by learning proper handling and behaviour while riding, we teach riders to develop skills in social behaviour and with other people besides their parents (Croatian Olympic Academy and Croatian Association for Therapeutic Riding, 2010 according to Mandić, 2015).

Italy

The social development of pupils with disabilities in Italy is a topic of significant importance. Italy has a legal framework that emphasises inclusive education and aims to provide equal opportunities for all individuals, including those with disabilities.

However, despite the legal provisions and principles, challenges persist in ensuring effective implementation and access to education. This section aims to synthesise key insights from various scholarly works focused on the social development and inclusive education of pupils with disabilities in Italy. Despite the challenges, numerous strategies and approaches have been successful in promoting social development among pupils with disabilities. Here are some studies, researchers, and effective practices that teachers can implement:

"The right to Inclusive Education of Persons with Disabilities in Italy. Reflections and Perspectives" - Sara Carnovali (2017): Carnovali's paper critically examines the implementation of the right to inclusive education for individuals with disabilities in Italy. It highlights the comprehensive legal protection and constitutional principles that support inclusive education. However, it also acknowledges the existing challenges in accessing education and discusses the proposed government reforms to address these issues. The article emphasises the need to consider individual and contextual factors, beyond the concept of disability alone, to foster an inclusive environment.

This means there is the need for two major aspects that have to be considered: Peer support and Inclusion on the one side, and an individualised support plan on the one side. First of all it is fundamental to encourage peer support and inclusion by fostering an inclusive classroom environment. Pair pupils with disabilities with supportive peers who can act as social mentors and provide guidance during social interactions. Facilitate cooperative learning activities that promote collaboration and teamwork among all students. At the same time, individualised support plans for each student, taking into account their specific needs and challenges is fundamental for a harmonised intervention. Collaborate with parents, special educators, and support staff to create personalised strategies to address social goals and foster positive social interactions.

A "school for all" based on the principles of non-discrimination and universal access has a decades-long tradition in Italy. Bellacicco, Dell'Anna, and Marsill (2022) conduct a mapping review of empirical research on school inclusion in Italy, highlighting the significance of sharing Italian empirical data globally to promote its implementation. The study identifies an increase in publications related to inclusive education, but also notes the lack of consistent definition for the term "inclusion" across studies, emphasising the need for a common understanding of the concept. The research provides valuable insights into trends and research topics in Italian inclusive education. This article presents the results of an inventory conducted with

the aim of summarising the empirical research published in Italian from 2009 to 2019 and describing, albeit partially, the main trends in terms of research topics and methods, like:

▶ **Social skills training**: Implement structured social skills training programs that focus on building communication skills, perspective taking, and conflict resolution. Use visual aids, role-playing, and real-life scenarios to provide practical opportunities for pupils to practise and apply these skills.

▶ **Positive reinforcement and rewards**: Use positive reinforcement to encourage and reinforce appropriate social behaviours. Provide verbal praise, tokens, or small rewards to acknowledge and celebrate students' efforts in demonstrating positive social skills and behaviours.

▶ **Sensory accommodations**: Create a sensory-friendly environment by considering the unique sensory needs of pupils with disabilities. Minimise sensory distractions, provide visual support, offer quiet spaces, and allow sensory breaks to help pupils regulate their sensory experiences and facilitate social engagement.

Sandri (2013-2014) discusses the commitment of Italian education policies to inclusive education and advocates for a special pedagogy that considers the educational needs of all individuals. It emphasises personalised teaching and dignified social experiences while stressing the importance of making schools accessible to all students and fostering a sense of responsibility among citizens. The article highlights the need for normative schools to adapt and incorporate inclusive principles. Including for example collaborative projects or inclusive recreational activities. Engaging pupils in collaborative projects fosters teamwork, cooperation, and communication skills. It encourages interaction among diverse

learners, promoting acceptance and understanding of differences. Teachers can design activities where pupils with disabilities work together with their peers, allowing for mutual learning and appreciation of individual strengths. Including pupils with disabilities in recreational activities creates opportunities for socialisation and relationship building. Organising inclusive sports, arts, or cultural events promotes interaction, teamwork, and shared experiences. Such activities help break down barriers and foster an inclusive environment where all pupils can actively participate and contribute.

Canevaro and de Anna (2010) explore the historical evolution of school integration in Italy, highlighting the welcoming culture within common schools and the mutual enrichment resulting from the inclusion of students with disabilities. The article emphasises the transformative potential of inclusive education, enabling students to develop new ways of learning and knowledge. Continuous collaboration among professionals, educational institutions, and families is stressed as crucial for successful inclusion. Two examples of this approach are Community involvement and peer support programmes. On the one hand, providing opportunities for pupils with disabilities to engage with the community through field trips, service projects, and interactions with diverse individuals. These experiences can help broaden their understanding of social norms, develop empathy, and strengthen their social connections beyond the classroom. On the other hand, peer support programs. Establishing peer support programs can facilitate social integration and empathy among pupils. Assigning peer mentors who can provide guidance, support, and friendship to pupils with disabilities can foster a sense of belonging and encourage positive social interactions. These programs can also promote acceptance and reduce stigma-surrounding disabilities within the classroom.

France

Confidence plays a crucial role in the education of learners with disabilities, as it can significantly impact their academic performance, social interactions, and overall wellbeing. In France, efforts have been made to promote confidence-building measures for learners with disabilities within the education system.

The ultimate aim of integrating children with disabilities into the education system in France is to provide them with equal opportunities for education, personal development, and social inclusion. This approach fosters a more inclusive society that values diversity and promotes the rights and well-being of all individuals.

Individualised support:

When a child with disabilities enters the school system, their needs and abilities are assessed to develop an individualised support plan. This plan, known as the Projet Personnalisé de Scolarisation (PPS), outlines the specific accommodations and support measures required for the child's education. These plans take into account the specific needs and strengths of each learner, aiming to provide appropriate accommodations and support to help build their confidence and ensure their success in the classroom. The PPS is developed in collaboration with the child's parents or legal guardians, teachers, and other professionals involved in their care.

Inclusive Education Approach:

The inclusive education approach aims to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all children. It encourages the active participation of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers without disabilities. The goal is to promote social integration, academic progress, and overall well-being.

Special education support

(AESH - Accompagnant des élèves en situation de handicap):

Accompanying staff provide assistance to pupils with disabilities.

Working under the pedagogical responsibility of teachers, their role is to encourage pupils' independence, without replacing them wherever possible. In addition to the presence of Accompanying Students with Disabilities in regular classrooms, specialised professionals may also be involved in supporting children with disabilities (see point 4).

Specialised professionals:

The involvement of specialised professionals, such as teachers trained in special education or therapists, contributes to confidence-building. These professionals provide targeted interventions, guidance, and support to address specific learning needs, enhance skills, and boost self-esteem.

Curriculum adaptations for individualised learning:

In some cases, the curriculum is adapted to meet the individual needs of children with disabilities. This may involve modifying teaching methods, providing additional resources or materials, or adjusting assessment methods to ensure that children with disabilities can actively participate and achieve their learning objectives in an inclusive learning environment that promotes success and self-assurance. Tailoring the learning experience to meet the individual needs of learners with disabilities can significantly enhance their confidence. Adjustments are made to teaching methods, instructional materials, and assessment approaches to create an inclusive learning environment that promotes success and self-assurance.

Training and professional development:

Teachers and school staff receive training and professional development opportunities to enhance their understanding of inclusive education and to develop the necessary skills to support children with disabilities effectively. This training

focuses on creating inclusive classrooms, adapting teaching strategies,

and fostering positive interactions among all students.

Peer interaction and social skills:

Encouraging positive peer interactions and social skills development is essential for learners with disabilities. Inclusive classroom settings in France facilitate interaction and collaboration among students with and without disabilities, promoting social integration and the development of mutual respect and empathy.

Parental involvement:

Parents play a crucial role in the integration of their child into the school system. They are actively involved in the decision-making process and collaborate with educators to ensure their child's needs are met. Regular communication channels are established between parents and school personnel to exchange information and address any concerns or challenges.

Ongoing evaluation and monitoring:

The progress and well-being of children with disabilities in the school system are regularly evaluated and monitored. This assessment helps determine the effectiveness of the support measures in place and allows for adjustments or modifications to be made as needed.

Inclusive environment:

Creating an inclusive environment that values diversity and respects the rights of all learners is essential in fostering confidence. Schools in France strive to provide a supportive and accepting atmosphere where learners with disabilities feel included, accepted, and valued for their unique abilities.

Awareness and sensitization:

Raising awareness and promoting sensitization within the school community about disabilities and the challenges faced by learners can help create a more empathetic and supportive environment. This awareness can contribute to reducing stigma, fostering inclusivity, and boosting the confidence of learners with disabilities.

The inclusion of disabled children in school education in France is governed by the law of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship for disabled people. This law affirms the right to schooling for all children, whatever their differences.

While France has made significant progress in promoting confidence-building measures for learners with disabilities, challenges and areas for improvement still exist. Continued efforts are being made to enhance inclusive practices, provide ongoing professional development for educators, and strengthen support systems to ensure that learners with disabilities receive the necessary resources and opportunities to develop confidence and succeed in their educational journey.

Belgium

Children with disabilities or learning difficulties are often confronted with negative remarks that lower their self-esteem and lead them into a spiral of failure. Faced with this situation, the Belgian Ministry of Education has put in place measures to ensure that children with disabilities receive better support and are better integrated into the school system in order to help them achieve success and boost their self-esteem. First of all, it included the notion of developing self-confidence in its "Mission Decree" of 24/07/1997, which defines the missions of basic and secondary education. Article 6 of Chapter II of this decree, which deals with the general objectives of basic and secondary education, defines the objectives pursued by education:

Article 6. - The French Community, for the education it organises, and any organising authority, for subsidised education, pursue simultaneously and without hierarchy the following objectives:

1. to promote the self-confidence and personal development of each pupil;

2. to enable all pupils to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to be lifelong learners and to take an active part in economic, social and cultural life;

3. to prepare all pupils to be responsible citizens, capable of contributing to the development of a democratic, caring and pluralist society that is open to other cultures;

4. to ensure that all pupils have equal opportunities for social emancipation.

Belgium ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. On the basis of this ratification and on the basis of the Belgian anti-discrimination legislation, every student with a disability (physical, sensory, intellectual, learning or behavioural impairment, chronic illness) is entitled to reasonable accommodation in education.

The "Reasonable Accommodation" decree of 7 December 2017 requires ordinary schools to make reasonable accommodations for a student with special needs, provided that the students' situation does not make it essential for them to be taken care of by special education.

What is a reasonable accommodation?

Reasonable accommodation is a concrete measure to reduce, as far as possible, the negative effects of an environment on a person's participation in society. Making reasonable accommodation for a person with a disability is an obligation.

In education, accommodation for a student with a disability can take different forms: material, pedagogical, organisational, etc.

This accommodation is made according to the needs of the pupil so that he or she can access, participate and progress on an equal footing with students who do not have a disability. The aim is not to give an advantage to children with disabilities, but to compensate for the disadvantages linked to the disability and to an unsuitable environment in order to enable them to overcome their difficulties and to achieve the objectives expected at the end of their schooling.

What are the criteria for a good accommodation?

▶ it meets the needs of the pupil and enables him/her to participate effectively in an activity;

▶ it allows the pupil to participate on an equal footing with his or her peers (by taking part, at his or her level, in the same activities as others; by trying to achieve the same learning objectives, but through other activities; by aiming at personal learning objectives);

▶ enables class work and movement around the school to be done as independently as possible;

▶ it ensures the safety and respects the dignity of the student with a disability.

How is the 'reasonableness' of the accommodation assessed?

▶ Cost: the facility must be reasonably priced. In judging this cost,

the financial capacity of the school should be taken into account;

▶ the impact on the organisation: if the accommodation does not cause lasting

disruption to the organisation of the classroom and school, it is more likely

to be considered reasonable;

▶ the frequency and expected duration of the accommodation:

an accommodation that is costly, but is used regularly or for a long period

of time or could be used by several pupils with disabilities will be more easily

considered reasonable;

▶ the impact of the accommodation on the quality of life of the student

or future students with disabilities;

▶ the impact of the accommodation on the environment and other pupils:

the accommodation will be considered reasonable if it does not create

a barrier for other pupils;

▶ the absence or lack of alternatives: an accommodation will be considered

reasonable more quickly if no other alternative can be found.

P.I.A. and "Pass Inclusion"

In addition to this lever of 'reasonable accommodation', the Ministry of Education

has also set up two other systems to support pupils with learning difficulties:

the Individual Learning Plan and the Inclusion Pass.

According to the decree of 3 March 2004 organising special education,

"the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is a methodological tool drawn up for each pupil

and adjusted throughout the pupil's schooling by the Class Council, on the basis of

observations and data provided by the various actors: the student and their parents,

the teaching team, the PMS centre, the staff in charge of remediation, the remedial

teacher, the therapists. In the IEP, specific objectives to be achieved during a specific period are listed. The IAP is therefore a dynamic tool which is constantly evolving and which follows the pupil throughout his or her schooling (basic and secondary). It gives each team an overview of the pupil's progress, the work accomplished, the projects underway and those to be continued.

The "Inclusion Pass" is a right that can be activated for every learner with a proven learning disability. The "Inclusion Pass" accompanies the student in order to optimise their inclusion in the school by enabling him or her to have access to facilities adapted to his or her needs. The central objective of this Pass is to promote the exchange of information between the student, their parents, the teaching team, the PMS centre and the multidisciplinary team of specialists concerned about the specific needs of a student and thus to enable them to better adapt their environment - school and family - so that they can make progress in their learning and develop to the full. It is a tool proposed to adults who accompany the schooling of pupils with learning disabilities.

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EU projects

Many EU projects tackle the topic of disability and inclusion. However, none of them approach the topic like the project "Role models for pupils with disabilities". And while many of the projects mentioned work towards strengthening the image of pupils with disabilities, the majority of them propose rather one-time workshops or theoretical explanations. They do not provide a visual representation along with the text content and some kind of storytelling. "Role models" proposes a different yet much needed approach to the subject of disability. What's more, the deliverables that are planned to be created throughout the "Role models" project target the pupils directly, while many other projects address rather their parents of the professionals who are working with them. And this seems particularly important.

The keywords used to research EU projects on the topic of disability and inclusion were the following:

▶ support young learners in becoming more confident

▶ ability and disability

▶ how to strengthen and develop the confidence and self-esteem of pupils with disabilities

▶ support the prevention of early school leaving

▶ learning disadvantages

▶ role models for pupils with disabilities

▶ portrays characters with a disability

▶ education of learners with disabilities

▶ confidence in the education of learners with disabilities.

Based on research, this is a non-exhaustive list of Erasmus+ projects whose main subject is somehow related to the subject of the Role Models project.

1. Project Name: **incLUEsion**

Project Number/Reference: Project-2019-3-EL02-KA105-005207

Keywords: Disability, Accessibility, Inclusion, Role Models

Year: 01-02-2020 - 31-12-2021

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2019-3-EL02-KA105-005207

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant: "Showing and explaining the concepts of disability, accessibility, and inclusion to the students. Gain self-esteem while interacting with individuals with disabilities, as well as patience and understanding towards all other social groups, while the project's aims were to teach them how to deal with people with disabilities," which can also contribute to a more positive portrayal of people with disabilities, hence improving the presentation and the construction of a concept of a role model.

Summary: One of the key goals of "inCLUEsion" was for participants to obtain a MOTIVE for action, while also gaining a better knowledge of concepts such as "disability", "accessibility," and "inclusion" as a result of participating in this empowering process of the project. Throughout the project, the participants we wanted to discover "clues" that would help them become more familiar with disability terminology, as well as with the values of inclusion and respect for others.
They would also be able to recognize what is accessible in their universities, places of employment, neighbourhoods, and communities. "inCLUEsion" didn't want to claim to be the panacea for all of society's social diversity, rather, seeking to teach individuals from all walks of life to be inclusive, open to accepting and learning from others from diverse walks of life.

2. Project Name: **MAGIC SEEN: Methods and games in the classroom - Special European education needs**

Project Number/Reference: 2020-1-RO01-KA101-078566

Keywords: Special Educational Needs, Role Models

Year: 01-11-2020 - 31-10-2022

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2020-1-RO01-KA101-078566

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant:

The Romanian organisation Centrul Scolar pentru Educatie Incluziva Targu Neamt "applied for this project because they wanted to have a qualified staff in the educational process with pupils with special needs" - which is crucial in working with pupils with disabilities and definitely contributes to their positive portrayal.

Summary: "By implementing this project we proposed to achieve the following objectives: development of competences for the integration of inclusive practices in the classroom by learning and using new methods and practical tools – didactic games, ICT, and free time activities that can be performed with students with SEN in learning activity and integrated educational therapy; qualification of the staff in the field of implementation of the educational digital game - which implies knowing the benefits of using challenging methods, which lead to the development of the competences for an independent life of the students; the development of the professional competences of 12 teachers for the use of ICT as a teaching – learning – evaluation resource and integration of them in the instructive-educational process for 115 students with SEN; developing the digital skills of a minimum of 40 students with SEN necessary to use the computer, as well as their continuous stimulation applying the concept of cause-effect when touching the keyboard, the mouse, listening to different louder sounds, observing their reactions the degree of involvement in the activity."

3. Project Name: **Activism si voluntariat pentru persoanele cu nevoi speciale**

Project Number/Reference: 2022-3-RO01-KA154-YOU-000103058

Keywords: Disability, Awareness, Social Change, Role Models

Year: 01-04-2023 - 31-03-2025

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2022-3-RO01-KA154-YOU-000103058

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant:
The project aims to reduce/eliminate preconceived ideas among young people about children with disabilities imposed by factors from the socio-cultural environment, awareness of the need for individual training in this sense for social, teaching and counsellor staff; the children with mental and intellectual disabilities who will be worked with will develop their skills and abilities, and the young people who will benefit from the project will see changes in themselves, becoming more fulfilled, more confident in themselves and determined to bring changes in society through their work.

4. Project Name: **Art Therapy - helps me!**

Project Number/Reference: 2020-1-RO01-KA101-078519

Keywords: Art Therapy, Special Educational Needs, Role Models

Year: 01-10-2020 - 30-09-2022

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2020-1-RO01-KA101-078519

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant: Through this project, the students experienced, together with the teachers, various art techniques such as: painting, collage, modelling, photography and were involved in group and play activities that led to the stimulation of individual and team communication. They helped to develop individuality and self-confidence, to find means of expression for various stressful situations, and to overcome the crisis situations of children with SEN.

5. Project Name: **Peer for Progress: Promoting research and entrepreneurial activity for the academic progression of people with sensory Impairment**

Project Number/Reference: 2019-1-ES01-KA201-064564

Keywords: Sensory Impairment, Success Stories, Role Models

Year: 01-09-2019 - 31-08-2022

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2019-1-ES01-KA201-064564

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant:
This project is relevant, because it talks about success stories of people with disabilities and contributes to the improvement of the portrayal of people with disability in a professional and educational context.

Summary: "This project is relevant because it talks about success stories of people with disabilities and contributes to the improvement of the portrayal of people with disability in a professional and educational context. The project aims to improve the access of people with sensory disabilities to higher education and to encourage them to obtain higher degrees. Currently, it is observed that people with sensory impairments have limited employment opportunities and face barriers in most steps of the process. However, there are a number of people with sensory disabilities who are successful in their careers. In this sense, the P4P project aims to take advantage of the learning of this group of people, identifying the barriers they have encountered and overcome, serving as an aid for current and future students with sensory disabilities to reduce and overcome these barriers."

6. Project Name: **Catalysts for change: Alpha volunteers**

Project Number/Reference: 2014-3-RO01-KA105-013281

Keywords: Disability, Inclusion, Self-Development, Role Models

Year: 01-03-2015 - 30-11-2015

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2014-3-RO01-KA105-013281

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant:

This project helps strengthen and develop the confidence of people with disabilities.

Summary: "In recent years, the understanding of disability has changed, meaning that social barriers define people's disabilities and not their individual deficiencies. Acceptance in society, reducing barriers decreases the effect of disability, increases skills and chances of integration and social autonomy. But still, when we mention disability, most people understand inability, young people with disabilities are not treated as "normal" persons and they are not helped to ignore their handicap that accompanies their whole life. For this reason, they do not have friends, they are not interacting with other young people, however, the integration of these young people in the community is a matter of human dignity, collective consciousness, and recognition. These are some of the needs and problems that young people with disabilities have. In these activities, young people with disabilities, volunteers, and professionals will learn and play together (...) the discipline of the game means no restoration of the right to dignity, the ultimate goal being that all young people realise that they're better than they believe they are. The method is a psycho-social one because it allows the development of skills related to self-discovery and personal boundaries, and the analysis of others' behaviour."

7. Project Name: **Yes, I can do it**

Project Number/Reference: 2020-1-HR01-KA101-077173

Keywords: Disability, Inclusion, Peer Acceptance, Role Models

Year: 15-02-2021 - 14-05-2022

URL: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2020-1-HR01-KA101-077173

How is this project related to Role Models and why is this project relevant:

"It is necessary to increase students' sensitivity to the needs and problems of educating children with disabilities, to teach students to recognize their attitudes and behaviours towards children with disabilities, to accept diversity and strengthen tolerance" - this project stresses the importance of inclusion of students with disability in social life in school, which also contributes to the improvement of a portrayal of people with disabilities by their peers.

Summary: "Numerous studies have revealed that children with disabilities are less accepted by their peers. The psychosocial development of children with disabilities is largely influenced by their acceptance in their peer group and the creation of friendly relationships with peers. In relation to their peers, children with disabilities learn and enhance their social, emotional and communication skills, which are the basis of all cognitive development. The school should foster and encourage acceptance of diversity because we are all different, we are all equally valuable and we all have the same right to get a quality education."

5

Conclusion

The concrete objectives of "The role models for pupils with disabilities" project are to support young learners in becoming more confident through the collection of success stories in which they can identify themselves, strengthen inclusion and diversity in the classrooms and foster the development of pupils' key competencies and basic skills (literacy and digital skills). While diversity can be viewed through many different lenses, we are particularly focused on embracing and celebrating the unique strengths of individuals with disabilities. Our project aims to highlight the positive aspects of disability, showcasing success stories that empower young learners to become more confident and identify themselves as role models. Our approach acknowledges the immense value that individuals with disabilities bring to the learning environment and recognizes their significant role in education. Through this focus on ability and disability, we seek to create a more inclusive and empowering educational experience, enabling all students to thrive and reach their full potential. In terms of results, we created a short guidebook for teachers on how to strengthen and develop the confidence and self-esteem of pupils with disabilities, as those play a crucial role in their education.

Through the development of confidence, we will tackle learning disadvantages and support the prevention of early school leaving.

Pupils with disabilities may have average or above average intelligence, but repeated academic failure weakens their confidence and self-esteem. Many also struggle with school success and are particularly at risk of early school leaving. Thus, it is crucial to start strengthening self-confidence in the early years of schooling. Following the guidebook, a collection of short, inspiring stories in ebook format about role models for pupils with disabilities will be created. Truly inclusive classrooms need books and stories that support inclusive goals and offer the possibility for identification for all pupils. Children need good role models to support their development. They look up to various role models that shape their behaviour,

their relationships, and the decisions they will make. Moreover, children are affected by the stories they read. Thus, a restricted representation of characters limits pupils' ability to see themselves and others in those stories. Children must be exposed to diverse literature, as this is beneficial to their self-image and finding their place in society (Leahy&Foley, 2018).

Despite the efforts to create more inclusive stories and inclusive classrooms in general, research shows that contemporary children's literature often reproduces stereotypes (Beckett,et al., 2010; Monoyiou,&Symeonidou, 2016). Children's literature that accurately portrays characters with a disability is one tool that can be used to promote awareness, and enhance inclusion and understanding, while simultaneously strengthening basic competences (literacy and digital competence). Thus, the project's outcome will be a collection of stories in which special attention will be given so that the role models with disabilities will be accurately portrayed.

Lastly, it will create a ready-to-use tool for teachers to create success stories with their students. This tool will guide teachers and pupils to focus on the positive aspects of their daily life and practice. It will contain a model structure for stories where learners can integrate their own stories – for example, what they feel they are good at, identifying their strengths, how they can overcome challenges, etc.

The "Role models for pupils with disabilities" project has taken a proactive approach to present a comprehensive and insightful guide on the situation of children with disabilities in the partner countries. This guide serves as a valuable resource, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities faced by these young learners in school settings. Through thorough research and collaboration, the guide encompasses a detailed analysis of the current state of inclusivity and support for children with disabilities in each partner country.

Moreover, the guide highlights various national initiatives that have been

implemented to prevent early school leaving and enhance the educational experiences of children with disabilities. By showcasing these initiatives, the project aims to promote knowledge sharing and foster a collaborative spirit among educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. This exchange of ideas and best practices is crucial in developing more effective strategies to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities and ensure their success in the education system.

Through the guide, the project partners seek to inspire positive change in the educational landscape, encouraging the adoption of inclusive policies and practices that will create a more supportive and accommodating environment for all learners. By building on the experiences and successes of different countries, the guide serves as a roadmap for further progress and innovation in the field of inclusive education.

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