stessie
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Policy Recommendations for
Strengthening Social Inclusion in European Education Systems
Based on the Scientific and Action-Based Development of the STESSIE Tool

Introduction

The STESSIE self-reflection tool was developed through a rigorous, evidence-based and co-creative process involving international research literature, education inspectorates, schools, and academic experts across several European countries. Drawing on established frameworks such as the Index for Inclusion and intersectional DisCrit approaches, the tool integrates perspectives of students, educational professionals and parents. The tool supports schools in translating data into concrete action plans for inclusive development at the school level.

Pilot implementations demonstrate that structured self-reflection enables schools to identify strengths and gaps in inclusive practices, align fragmented initiatives, and strengthen collaboration with families and local communities. These findings provide a strong empirical basis for formulating policy recommendations at both national and European levels.

The following recommendations are organized into four interconnected policy domains.

1. Governance and quality assurance

1.1. Institutionalize self-reflection on inclusion within quality assurance systems

National education systems should embed validated self-reflection instruments on social inclusion, such as STESSIE, within their school quality assurance and inspection frameworks. Rather than focusing exclusively on compliance and performance indicators, quality assurance mechanisms should explicitly support developmental evaluation processes that help schools improve inclusive practices over time. A shared reference framework can strengthen coherence across countries and support mutual learning.

1.2. Align school leadership policies with inclusive values

Inclusive leadership should be recognised as a core professional competence within national leadership standards and evaluation criteria. School leaders play a central role in developing shared visions on diversity and inclusion, allocating resources, and fostering collaborative cultures. Policy frameworks should therefore explicitly link leadership development to inclusive school transformation.

1.3. Promote ethical and formative use of inclusion data

Policies should ensure that data generated through self-reflection tools are used primarily for formative and developmental purposes rather than for sanctioning or ranking schools. Evidence from the STESSIE project shows that trust-based data cultures enable schools to engage in honest reflection and meaningful improvement.

1.4. Harmonize inclusion frameworks across Europe while respecting diversity of contexts

European policy actors should support the development of a shared conceptual framework for school-level inclusion that can be adapted to national systems. STESSIE demonstrates that common dimensions, such as leadership, school climate, and classroom practice, are applicable across diverse educational contexts. Such harmonization can strengthen policy coherence and enhance the transferability of good practices.

2. Participation and equity

2.1. Systematically integrate student and parent voice into policy and practice

National policies should mandate the inclusion of student and parent perspectives in school evaluation and improvement processes. Particular attention should be given to engaging families and learners from marginalized or vulnerable backgrounds, whose voices are often underrepresented in decision-making structures.

2.2. Embed intersectionality within inclusive education policies

Current policies often conceptualize inclusion primarily through special educational needs frameworks. The STESSIE project highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional approach that recognizes overlapping dimensions of disadvantage, including disability, socio-economic status, migration background, language, and gender. National governments should revise inclusion strategies and funding models to reflect this complexity and move beyond deficit-oriented categorization systems.

2.3. Promote coherent school-wide strategies for diversity and inclusion

Evidence from pilot schools indicates that initiatives related to well-being, participation, anti-bullying, and learning support are often fragmented. Policy should encourage schools to integrate these domains into coherent whole-school inclusion strategies. This requires coordination across departments and alignment with national inclusion objectives.

3. Professional capacity building

3.1. Strengthen teacher education and professional development in inclusive practice

Inclusive pedagogy, self-reflection, and diversity competence should be embedded as core elements of initial teacher education and continuous professional development. Teachers require structured support to reflect critically on expectations, bias, and classroom practices.

3.2. Support structural collaboration at school level

Policies should provide time, resources, and organizational frameworks that enable collaboration between teachers, support staff, school leaders, parents, and external professionals. STESSIE findings demonstrate that inclusive practice depends on collective responsibility rather than isolated interventions. Funding schemes should prioritize whole-school development plans that foster teamwork and shared accountability for inclusion.

3.3. Foster long-term action research partnerships

Sustainable improvement requires ongoing learning. Governments should fund long-term partnerships between schools, support and evaluating bodies to translate self-reflection results into action research and innovation projects.

4. Sustainability and scaling

4.1. Anchor evidence-based tools within national support infrastructures

Validated tools such as STESSIE should be embedded within national professional support systems, including inspectorate services, teacher training institutes, and digital education platforms. This ensures continuity beyond project-based funding and enables broad access for schools.

4.2. Support dissemination through professional development events and networks

Large-scale dissemination through national and European professional development events can accelerate uptake and shared learning. Policy should ensure that dissemination is accompanied by training and guidance, rather than limited to technical access to tools.

4.3. Ensure continuous updating and scientific validation

To remain relevant, inclusion tools and frameworks must be regularly updated in line with new research and societal developments. Policy should support mechanisms for periodic scientific review and revision of instruments such as STESSIE.

Conclusion

This project provides strong evidence that scientifically grounded, participatory, and reflective tools can support schools in developing inclusive practices in a sustainable and meaningful way. Translating these insights into policy requires action across four domains: governance and quality assurance, participation and equity, professional capacity building, and sustainability and scaling.

By embedding self-reflection within quality systems, strengthening participation, investing in professional learning, and ensuring long-term sustainability, national and European policymakers can move from fragmented inclusion initiatives toward coherent, evidence-based strategies for social inclusion in education. These measures contribute directly to the goals of equity, democratic participation, and high-quality education for all learners across Europe.