




Same Progress for All? Inclusive Education, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities and Students With Intellectual Disability in European Countries

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Abstract

Over the course of the last 30 years, inclusive education has emerged as a key aim of education policies around the world. Also in Europe, most countries took efforts to make their education systems more inclusive—which led to growing numbers of children and young persons with disabilities in general education in Europe. The implementation processes of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) fuelled these efforts. However, as some authors have argued, not all students with disabilities seem to have benefited in the same way from these developments—such as children and young persons with intellectual disability (ID). This paper aims to explore this phenomenon in more depth by comparing some measures in relation to the implementation processes of the UNCRPD of seven European countries. Doing so, we analyze trends in placements (mainstream and special schools) of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in general and of students with intellectual disability specifically. As we show, an increase of students identified as having SEN in mainstream schools can be observed in all countries during the implementation process of the UNCRPD. However, in comparison to this rather broad group of learners, the percentage of students with intellectual disability in mainstream settings did not increase as much. Furthermore, the calculation of the “exclusion rate” revealed that this group of learners remains a key population of special schools. These results need to be understood as effects of specific shortcomings in the implementation of the UNCRPD, as we discuss in a further section. We conclude our paper with recommendations on future research and policies on inclusive education regarding students with intellectual disability.

Keywords: comparison, inclusive education, intellectual disability, school, UNCRPD

Over the course of the last 30 years, inclusive education has emerged as a key aim of education policies around the world. Indeed, inclusive education has become a “global concept” (Boyle & Sharma, 2015, p. 2). Fuelled by international declarations (such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and Human Rights Treaties), Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), countries from all continents started their journeys toward inclusion. As several studies have shown, all students can benefit from inclusive education, as a proper implementation of inclusive education offers opportunities to improve academic as well as social learning for everybody

(Hehir et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2014). However, due to differing educational systems, available resources and understandings of inclusive education, implementation strategies differ considerably between national states (Stangvik, 2010). While some countries developed broad strategies aiming to include every learner in mainstream schools, others implemented reforms that led to coexisting systems of inclusive education and special schools (Powell, 2011; Richardson & Powell, 2011). In some cases, policies embraced the language of inclusive education but did not lead to any change on the ground, and this is why some authors identify a gap between “rich rhetoric and poor reality” (Anastasiou & Keller, 2014, p. 364). Furthermore, achieving change toward inclusion has been considered as challenging, due to competing discourses around schooling, such as accountability, marketization and meritocracy (Slee, 2011). Overall, inclusive education policies differ, and, likewise, outcomes of

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policies in this area differ as well (Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp, & Harper, 2013; Romero-Contreras, García-Cedillo, & Fletcher, 2017). However, besides several challenges in the implementation of inclusive education and differing policies and outcomes, the move toward inclusive education has led to growing numbers of children and young persons with disabilities in general education over the last three decades in many countries across the world (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018; OECD, 2012).

Nonetheless, it remains rather unclear if all students with disabilities have benefited in the same way from these developments. Analyzing international trends in inclusive education over the 2000s, Ferguson (2008) observed that even where there was progress regarding inclusive education for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in general, these processes developed at a much slower pace for students with intellectual disability. In particular, children considered as having “severe intellectual impairments” seem to be at greater risk of being excluded from mainstream education and are more likely to be educated in special schools or in special classes within mainstream schools (Inclusion International, 2009; Romero-Contreras et al., 2017). Interestingly, there is only a handful of international studies on the interplay of inclusive education, policies and students with intellectual disability (e.g., Hehir et al., 2016). Hence, *international comparative studies on these aspects can be considered as a major gap within inclusive education research.*

On the European continent, national states also took, in line with the global trends outlined above, several efforts to make their education systems more inclusive (Smyth et al., 2014). However, even though the European Union tried to facilitate and orchestrate these endeavors by several policies (e.g., Council of the European Union, 2018; European Commission, 2016), European countries still developed differing approaches toward achieving inclusive education—with different outcomes as well (Biermann & Powell, 2014). Similar to international developments, inclusive education reforms led to an increase of students considered as having SEN in regular schools over the course of the last 30 years (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018; Meijer, 2003). Nonetheless, also in most European countries, progress toward achieving inclusion has not affected students with ID as much as other students with disabilities (Ebersold, 2011). Access to mainstream schools seems to be linked with types of impairment, and students with intellectual disability are assumed not to be included as often as students with learning difficulties or speech impairments (Ebersold, 2011). Yet, research for Europe on the interplay of policies, inclusive education and students with intellectual disability is also rare. At the national level, the work of McConkey, Kelly, Craig, and Shevlin (2016), who explored the aspects mentioned for the Republic of Ireland, is a notable exception. Based on data from the Republic of Ireland’s National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD), researchers could show, among other things, that the transition from primary to secondary school often led to a relocation of students with intellectual disability from mainstream to special schools. Notwithstanding these problems, political efforts to implement inclusive education led from 2003 to 2013 to a progressive shift in educational provision for students with ID in the Republic of Ireland, with a

steady decrease of this population attending special schools (McConkey et al., 2016). However, similar to the global level, *European comparative research on these aspects does not yet exist.*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities and the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Due to the gap outlined in the previous section of our paper, scholars from different European countries organized a round table at the European conference of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IASSIDD) in Athens in 2018. The aim of this panel was to reconstruct and compare developments in the implementation of inclusive education in relation to students with intellectual disability in different European countries in order to identify overall trends, but also challenges in researching this topic. The idea for this article stems from this round table discussion. As mentioned, the paper aims to start bridging the gaps outlined above, with a specific focus on the area of policies: the implementation processes of inclusive education in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in different European countries.

The UNCRPD, in Article 24, obliges signatory states to “ensure an inclusive education system at all levels,” insisting that all “[p]ersons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability” and have full access to “an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live” (UNCRPD, 2016). As stated in Article 1 of the Convention, disability encompasses all impairments including ID. Hence, the UNCRPD was and still is expected to be a lever for change toward inclusion; to foster the building of inclusive education systems and speed up reform processes so that everybody, including persons with intellectual disability, can enjoy the benefits of inclusive education.

However, even though several scholars have highlighted the importance of researching the impact of the UNCRPD on education systems (e.g., Blanck, Edelstein, & Powell, 2013; D’Alessio & Watkins, 2009), relatively little is known about how much progress has been made within the implementation processes of the UNCRPD across Europe. In particular, there are no empirical studies examining how far these developments have led to improvements for persons with intellectual disability in the area of education.

Comparing policy developments in relation to the UNCRPD enables researchers to identify patterns and trends in the processes mentioned, and thus gather valuable knowledge for monitoring and improving these developments. Such a project offers insights about strengths and weaknesses of implementation processes in relation to a specific group that, all too often, has been overlooked in both research and policies (Walmsley & Jarrett, 2019).

Although comparing developments across countries seems to be promising due to the given reasons, it is linked with considerable challenges as well. Even where there are similarities between European education systems, they also vary a lot due to

differing sociocultural, historical, political and economic contexts, and they have their own complexities (Powell, 2011). Thus, international comparative research on education is challenging, but comparative research on inclusive education especially (e.g., D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009). In addition to the "general" challenges of comparative research between education systems, the fact that inclusive education is embedded in both general and special education frameworks of provision that differ among European states, presents a specific challenge (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2007). Furthermore, there are substantial differences regarding the definitions of disability/SEN across European countries (Hauerwas & Mahon, 2018), including definitions of the category of ID (Ebersold, 2011).

In the following sections, we present how we addressed the complexities outlined above. First, we trace the differing pathways of implementing inclusive education between European states and link them to the rationale for our sample. Second, we explain the methodology of our paper in relation to the problems of comparing developments in inclusive education in relation to students with intellectual disability.

Historical Pathways of Education Systems and Differing Strategies to Implement Inclusive Education: Compiling a Diverse Sample

After World War II, in most European states, the vast majority of children and young people with disabilities were educated in special education settings. In some countries, people with intellectual disability were excluded even from these settings, as they were regarded as unable to learn. For example, in Austria, children with intellectual disability were frequently labeled as "unable to attend school" and, thus, access to formal education was denied (Buchner & Proyer, 2020). Since the 1960s, special education systems opened up for this population, and special schools for students with intellectual disability were founded. Due to the formerly prevalent exclusion, this needs to be considered as an important step in the history of education for persons with intellectual disability. This mode of organizing special education has been termed as a two-track approach (Meijer, 2003)—a dual system that envisages "regular" schools as spaces of education for students without disabilities, and special schools for their peers with disabilities.

Since the 1970s, education in special schools was criticized more frequently in many Western European countries—as these schools were regarded as segregated educational spaces, excluding students with disabilities from their "nondisabled" peers, and thus lowering opportunities for academic and social learning. This critique, formulated by the disabled people's and the so called parents' movements, became increasingly influential. These movements caused pressure at local, national and international political levels, which explains why in the 1970s, countries like Italy and Norway, and many Western European states since the 1980s (i.e., Austria, Federal Republic of Germany, Greece, and Republic of Ireland), started to change their (special) education policies; trying to open up mainstream education for students with disabilities (Smyth et al., 2014). After the fall of the Iron Curtain, most Eastern European countries

subsequently joined this endeavor. The sample for our study was compiled with attention to these historically diverse routes of education systems in relation to establishing inclusive education, including such countries as Poland and Czechia that started implementing similar policies in the 1990s.

Over the course of the years, European states developed differing approaches toward inclusive education. Most of them, including the majority of countries represented in our sample, developed multitrack approaches, trying to create a continuum of services between the two systems (Meijer, 2003). This means a coexistence of special schools and inclusive approaches in mainstream schools. Nonetheless, the category of a multitrack approach includes a certain spectrum of progress: countries such as Germany for a long time kept a strong focus on education in special schools, and rather slowly developed the provision of inclusive education in mainstream schools (Powell, 2011). Austria developed this approach since the late 1980s, resulting in an equalization of the numbers of students with disabilities educated in mainstream and special schools by 2000 (Buchner & Gebhardt, 2011). In comparison to this type of implementation strategy, far fewer European countries, such as Iceland, Italy, Norway and Spain, developed what has been categorized as a one-track approach: aiming to include all learners in mainstream schools (Meijer, 2003). Also, this variety of approaches is represented in our sample, as it includes Italy. However, it remains rather unclear how these developments affected the population of students with intellectual disability. It can be assumed that countries following a one-track approach also took efforts to include this population, while multitrack approaches seem to have led more often to a segregated schooling of students with intellectual disability in some countries (Ebersold, 2011).

Since 2007, most European states have signed and ratified the UNCRPD. As mentioned, this document obliges state parties to build inclusive education systems catering for *all* learners. In this paper, we are aiming to analyze these developments in seven different European countries: Austria, Czechia, Germany, Greece, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, and Poland. All these national states have ratified the UNCRPD and are in the implementation process now. This compilation must be considered as a *diverse sample*, as we have shown that countries differ considerably concerning the histories of their education systems, but also regarding implementation strategies of inclusive education.

Yet, such an endeavor holds certain methodological challenges, which we discuss in the next section. As we will show, indicators that combine placement and impairment of students appear to be a reliable approach to overcome these challenges.

Measuring Inclusion in Relation to Place and Impairment

In most European states, the efforts to make education systems more inclusive materialized in differing educational settings in relation to support and place, which can be roughly categorized in four modes (European Agency, 2018): (1) placement in a mainstream class that is equipped with extensive personnel resources; (2) placement in regular classes where students with SEN receive support by the hour or receive

parallel support by teaching assistants and/or special education teachers; (3) placement in special classes (in which only students with SEN are educated) in mainstream schools; and (4) placement in special schools. Yet, inclusive education, understood as a process (Booth & Ainscow, 2016), aims to transform the whole education system which means to make every single school inclusive—which includes the transformation of special schools into inclusive schools (Sebba & Ainscow, 1996). In other words, segregated learning spaces, such as special schools or special classes in mainstream settings, are not consistent with the principles of inclusive education.

This is important for the methodology of this paper for the following reasons. First, implementing inclusive education in a way that fits the obligations of the UNCRPD means that states need to stop “sustaining two systems of education: mainstream and special/segregated education systems” (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, p. 13). Thus, states should shift resources in order to create more inclusive education, which means reducing segregated spaces and creating more inclusive learning spaces. This involves a shift from a multi- to a one-track approach. Second, and corresponding to the former argument, the rate of progress in such transformation processes can be measured by the educational placements of students diagnosed as having SEN or rather intellectual disability. For example, *the numbers of students positioned in mainstream schools vs. the number of students positioned in special schools*.

Within European comparative research, this approach plays a rather prominent role, as it seems to help measuring developments in inclusive education despite the complexity of national education systems (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009). Thus, indicators referring to the relation of placement and the school administrative category of SEN have been developed, such as the “mainstreaming rate” (percentage of all students with SEN placed in mainstream settings). Even the placements of students with disabilities in mainstream schools do not allow for drawing conclusions on the quality of education performed in these settings, being placed in a mainstream school can be understood as a necessity for inclusive education. Measuring placements in educational settings needs to be understood as a rather broad approach; an approach that is able to *identify patterns in implementing inclusive education at national level* and make these developments, at least to a certain degree, comparable. However, as implied already in the last sentence, measuring placements of students in different educational settings is linked to some problems for international comparison. These issues refer to data collection of educational systems and their school administrative categories in relation to disability, such as SEN.

In terms of the latter aspect, a challenge for comparison is the fact that European education systems differ concerning the construction as well as the types of SEN: what is understood as SEN differs remarkably among countries and relates to varying sociocultural and historical bearings (Biermann & Powell, 2014). For example, while within most European countries SEN refers to different forms of disability, in others SEN includes learners with an ethnic minority background as well as gifted learners (Watkins, Ebersold, & Lénárt, 2014). Regarding disabilities, some national education systems define only two types of SEN, while others distinguish between more than ten

types; however, most countries categorize learners between six and ten forms of disabilities (Watkins et al., 2014). Even though we are aware that inclusive education is not about labels, the fact that in all European education systems the distribution of inclusive and special education is bound to the classification of SEN (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2007), SEN must be considered as a rather approximate but also inevitable variable for doing international comparative research on inclusive education.

Another challenge of our approach that needs to be addressed is the data collection in relation to educational placements. Comparing numbers of students positioned in special schools, special classes in mainstream schools or in regular classes potentially offers *insights into broad tendencies of the implementation of inclusive education in different countries*—relatively independent from the structures of the individual education systems. However, also the availability and reliability of statistics in relation to placements differs between countries. As the European Agency for the Development of Special Needs and Inclusive Education has pointed out, national policies sometimes do not define precisely the differences between an inclusive or a segregated setting (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). For example, some countries might consider a special class within a mainstream school as “inclusive”—and thus, in terms of data collection, would only differentiate between special schools and mainstream schools.

Hence, availability and shortcomings of data about placements of learners in different settings are a key concern that we address in the following section of our paper in relation to the longitudinal design of the study.

Availability of Data and Design of the Study

Concerning our aim to investigate the level of implementation of inclusive education in accordance with the UNCRPD, we decided to create a *small longitudinal sample*—also, as we will show, due to the availability of data.

Although implementation processes of the UNCRPD started at different points in time by the seven countries included in the following analysis (Austria (2008), Czechia (2009), Germany (2009), Greece (2012), the Republic of Ireland (2018), Italy (2009), and Poland (2012)), we chose to draw on the datasets of the European Agency for the school year 2010/2011 (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012) and the latest published data available, which refers to school year 2016/2017 (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). This decision was guided, on the one hand, by the availability of data (as mentioned, the dataset on school year 2016/2017 is the most recent one). On the other hand, we consider the period represented in these reports as highly relevant for implementing the Convention, as the majority of countries in our sample had already started their implementation processes of the Convention. Furthermore, it is important to note that despite the fact that Greece, Poland and the Republic of Ireland only recently ratified the Convention, they had already signed the document in the 2000s and, since then, took measures to prepare the implementation process.

Limitations exist, however, due to the inconsistencies in data collection of some educational authorities, and thus, these inconsistencies can also be found in the data sets of the European Agency. For example, statistics in Austria and Germany are only compiled in a binary way (students with SEN who are attending a mainstream or special school), which means that no data exist on students placed in special classes in mainstream environments. Within the data set of the European Agency for school year 2010/2011, there are no accurate figures on students with SEN who are “fully included” in mainstream classes for Greece. Furthermore, data on students with SEN in special schools in the Republic of Ireland is not differentiated in primary and secondary education—as all Irish special schools are designated as primary education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012).¹

However, the reports of the European Agency refer only to the broad category of SEN. As mentioned already, data on students with intellectual disability were more difficult to access. Thus, the team of authors had to access data sets from their national education authorities—which was only partly successful. Even though data on the student population of persons with ID were available for Czechia, Germany, Poland, and partially for Italy (there are no data available on students with ID in the few Italian special schools), gathering data for the other countries proved to be a work best described as collecting “bits and pieces.”

The Republic of Ireland has established the National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) that collates data on the population of persons with ID for planning purposes in relation to health, housing and transport. However, disaggregated data relating to students with intellectual disability is very limited and confined to age ranges (e.g., 5–9 years, 10–14 years and so on), and medical categories concerning the “levels” of intellectual disability. Data on placements and intellectual disability for Greece are only available for special schools but not for mainstream schools. Furthermore, in Austria, there are no official statistics in relation to impairment-related forms of SEN at national level.

Although the data for the cohort of students with intellectual disability we compiled has limitations, it enables us to identify broad tendencies across countries. Tables 1 and 2 offer an overview on total numbers (if available) on the populations of students in compulsory schooling and students with SEN in relation to educational placements, both for school years 2010/2011 and 2016/2017. Tables 3 and 4 offer the same data for the population of students with ID.

In the following, we are analyzing the trends of two main indicators of the development of the implementation of inclusive education: the percentage of students with SEN in mainstream schools and the so called “exclusion rate.” Doing so, we first try to identify trends in relation to the category of SEN. As a second step, we compare these tendencies with data relating to the category of intellectual disability.

Trends in Placements in Mainstream Settings

One of the key indicators for comparative research in relation to inclusive education is the *percentage of students with SEN who are educated in mainstream school settings* with their nondisabled peers of the same age for at least 80% of the time in comparison to the whole population of pupils with SEN (European Agency, 2018). In Table 5, the calculation of this indicator is included for school years 2010/2011 and 2016/2017. Data were available for five of the seven countries. However, the data set of the European Agency for 2010/2011 does not include reliable numbers on students with SEN in mainstream settings in Greece. The data for the Republic of Ireland on secondary education cannot be used for this school year as there is no reliable total number of all students with SEN in secondary education (the data offered in the report refers only to students with SEN in mainstream schools and excludes those in segregated settings). We calculated the chi-square to see if changes in percentage points are significant. Results show that all changes in percentage points are highly significant.

Comparing this indicator across the seven countries, we can see that the percentage points of students with SEN in mainstream settings increased in five of the seven countries. For Austria, Czechia, Germany and Poland an increase of more than 10 percentage points can be observed from 2010/2011 to 2016/2017, ranging from 10.80 (Austria) to 17.83 (Germany). In school year 2016/2017, Austria and Czechia reached a percentage of almost 70%, Poland (56.88) moved over the 50% point and Germany got closer to placing half of its students with SEN in mainstream education (43.39). Italy, which had already a figure very close to 100% at the beginning of the 2010s, was able to move even closer to placing all students with SEN in mainstream schools (from 99.03 to 99.12). Interestingly, despite the preparation activities for the UNCRPD, a slight decrease in the percentage points of students in mainstream settings is evident in the Republic of Ireland (−0.83).

Comparing data between primary and secondary education for school year 2010/2011, a relatively *huge gap* between the percentage of students with SEN in primary and those in secondary mainstream education appears in all countries except Italy. For Poland (−22.43) and Germany (−16.51) the difference between these two institutional stages can be considered as very strong. In the latter country, the percentage of students with SEN in mainstream secondary settings was even under 20% (18.14). Austria and Czechia scored around 50%, and in Poland slightly over 30% of all students with SEN were educated in a general secondary school. This gap between primary and secondary education can be considered as “no big news,” since it was evident in quite a few studies on inclusive education (Biewer et al., 2015; Biewer, Böhm, & Schütz, 2015).

However, between 2010/2011 and 2016/2017, the percentage of students in both educational stages increased in all countries where data were available. Especially for secondary education, rather strong increases can be observed. Comparing the percentage points of students with SEN in secondary mainstream over this period, Germany showed the highest increase (+22.23). For Poland, Czechia and Austria increases in the range from 10 to 20 percentage points are evident. Thus, the strong gap between

¹A detailed description of the data collection and other methodical aspects of the European Agency database can be found in the methodology reports of the Agency (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016a, 2018).

TABLE 1
Data on students in compulsory education and students with special educational needs (SEN) in relation to stage and location of education for school year 2010/2011

Country	Number of all students in formal compulsory education school year 2010/2011 (including public and private schools)		Number of students with SEN in compulsory education in primary education school year 2010/2011		Number of students with SEN in compulsory education in secondary education school year 2010/2011		Overall number of students with SEN in inclusive ^a settings school year 2010/2011		Number of students with SEN in inclusive settings in primary education school year 2010/2011		Number of students with SEN in inclusive settings in secondary education school year 2010/2011		Overall number of students with SEN in segregated settings in primary education school year 2010/2011		Overall number of students with SEN in segregated settings in secondary education school year 2010/2011	
	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011	2010/2011
Austria	770,762	326,816	443,946	29,242	10,485	18,757	16,943	6,820	10,123	6,820	10,123	12,299	3,665	10,123	3,665	8,634
Czechia	835,796	474,327	361,469	72,423	35,596	36,827	39,277	20,718	18,559	20,718	18,559	33,146	14,878	18,559	14,878	18,268
Germany	7,574,324	2,989,678	4,584,646	400,063	172,341	227,722	101,044	59,724	41,320	59,724	41,320	299,019	112,617	41,320	112,617	186,402
Greece	1,131,901	801,101	330,800	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	34,211	25,817	n/a	25,817	8,394
Ireland	668,245	419,393	248,852	39,116	25,017	14,099	31,404	17,305	14,099	17,305	14,099	7,712	n/a	14,099	n/a	n/a
Italy	4,615,067	2,573,147	2,041,920	189,563	79,199	110,364	187,728	77,921	109,807	77,921	109,807	1,835	1,278	109,807	1,278	557
Poland	5,308,335	2,588,744	2,719,591	160,846	70,718	90,128	67,175	38,422	28,753	38,422	28,753	93,671	32,296	28,753	32,296	61,375

Sources: European Agency, 2012.

^aAccording to the definition of the European Agency, settings are considered as inclusive when time in class with peers is 80% minimum and students are not placed in special classes in mainstream schools. However, some states (Austria and Germany) do not differentiate data on mainstream schools concerning these aspects.

^bSpecial classes in mainstream schools and special schools.

TABLE 2
Data on students in compulsory education and students with SEN in relation to stage and location of education for school year 2016/2017

Country	Number of all students in formal compulsory education school year 2016/2017 (including public and private schools)	Number of all students in formal compulsory education in primary education for school year 2016/2017	Number of students with SEN in compulsory education in primary education school year 2016/2017	Number of students with SEN in compulsory education in secondary education school year 2016/2017	Overall number of all students with SEN in inclusive settings in primary education school year 2016/2017	Number of students with SEN in inclusive settings in primary education school year 2016/2017	Number of students with SEN in inclusive settings in secondary education school year 2016/2017	Overall number of all students with SEN in segregated settings in primary education year 2016/2017	Overall number of all students with SEN in segregated settings in secondary education school year 2016/2017			
Austria	733,823	401,167	332,656	24,528	9,575	14,953	16,860	6,638	10,222	7,668	2,937	4,731
Czechia	982,626	592,374	390,252	97,868	47,577	50,291	66,710	32,893	33,817	31,158	14,684	16,474
Germany	7,492,902	2,954,775	4,538,127	408,712	165,457	243,255	177,324	79,126	98,198	231,388	86,331	145,057
Greece	880,295	640,522	317,571	59,861	30,112	29,749	42,948	23,352	19,596	9,754	4,297	5,457
Ireland	754,428	562,724	191,704	52,297	38,543	13,754	41,550	31,501	10,049	10,747	7,042	3,705
Italy	4,521,640	2,792,414	1,729,226	160,315	90,845	69,470	158,907	89,628	69,279	1,408	1,217	191
Poland	3,364,068	2,301,924	1,062,144	126,913	78,863	48,050	72,191	48,134	24,057	54,722	30,729	23,993

Sources: European Agency, 2020.

TABLE 3
Data on students in compulsory education and students with intellectual disability in relation to stage and location of education for school year 2010/2011

Country	Number of all students in formal compulsory education school year 2010/2011 (including public and private schools)	Number of all students in formal compulsory education in primary education for school year 2010/2011	Number of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in primary education school year 2010/2011	Number of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in secondary education school year 2010/2011	Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings in primary education school year 2010/2011	Number of students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings in primary education school year 2010/2011	Number of students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings in secondary education school year 2010/2011	Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in segregated settings in primary education year 2010/2011	Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in segregated settings in secondary education school year 2010/2011
Austria	770,762	326,816	443,946	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Czechia	835,796	474,327	361,469	n/a	1,119	n/a	21,087	n/a	n/a
Germany	7,574,324	2,989,678	4,584,646	78,277	3,189	1,663	75,088	n/a	n/a
Greece	1,131,901	801,101	330,800	n/a	n/a	n/a	4,468	1,067	1,747
Ireland	668,245	419,393	248,852	6,841	1,703	341	5,000	2,767	2,233
Italy	4,615,067	2,573,147	2,041,920	116,287	116,287	48,616	n/a	n/a	n/a
Poland	5,308,335	2,588,744	2,719,591	62,599	27,432	14,792	35,167	16,177	18,990

Sources: European Agency, 2012; Czech Ministry of Education, Destatis, 2011; KMK, 2020; Polish Ministry of Education, Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research; Hel- lenic Statistical Authority; National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) (Ireland).

TABLE 4
Data on students in compulsory education and students with intellectual disability in relation to stage and location of education for school year 2016/2017

Country	Number of all students in formal compulsory education school year 2016/2017 (including public and private schools)	Number of all students in formal compulsory education in primary school year 2016/2017	Number of all students in formal compulsory education in secondary school year 2016/2017	Number of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education		Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings primary education school year 2016/2017	Number of students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings in secondary education school year 2016/2017	Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings in secondary education school year 2016/2017	Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in segregated settings in primary education school year 2016/2017	Overall number of all students with intellectual disability in segregated settings in secondary education school year 2016/2017
				Number of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in primary school year 2016/2017	Number of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in secondary school year 2016/2017					
Austria	733,823	401,167	332,656	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
Czechia	982,626	592,374	390,252	14,831	n/a	2,013	n/a	12,808	n/a	
Germany	7,492,902	2,954,775	4,538,127	87,516	n/a	10,373	4,988	77,143	n/a	
Greece	880,295	640,522	317,571	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3,508	1,258	
Ireland	754,428	562,724	191,704	7,706	4,432	2,328	1,635	5,346	2,581	
Italy	4,521,640	2,792,414	1,729,226	156,286	64,227	156,286	64,227	n/a	n/a	
Poland	3,364,068	2,301,924	1,062,144	48,621	26,579	24,196	13,933	24,425	11,779	

Sources: European Agency, 2020; Czech Ministry of Education, Destatis, 2017; KMK, 2018; Polish Ministry of Education, Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research; Hel- lenic Statistical Authority; National Intellectual Disability Database (NIIDD) (Ireland).

the percentage of students with SEN in primary and secondary schools significantly decreased; in some countries it was even almost adjusted. For example, in Austria and Czechia, rather small differences exist between the percentages of both stages for this school year (Austria: 0.96, Czechia: 1.89). However, overall, the percentages of students with SEN in secondary schools are still lower when compared with those in primary schools—except Italy. Germany still has the lowest percentage of students with SEN in secondary schools (40.37) and Poland the second lowest (50.07).

Altogether, the figures above show a clear trend: over the period in focus, the percentage of students with SEN in mainstream schools increased significantly (except the Republic of Ireland). However, this trend takes place at varying levels. Thus, there are still strong differences concerning the overall percentage between the countries, ranging between more than 99% in Italy to 43.39 in Germany. Interestingly, part of the trend outlined before seems to be the tendency of adjusting the gap between percentages of students with SEN in primary and secondary education—but also this development takes place at different levels.

Thus, one might interpret this trend as the result of efforts in the field of inclusive education. In this line of interpretation, the implementation process of the UNCRPD led to a certain progress in inclusive education—at least concerning placements in mainstream schools. As we will discuss later on, the quality of education in these settings needs to be considered as rather diverse. However, the trend of increasing placements in mainstream education of students with SEN differs considerably in comparison with the category of students with intellectual disability.

Data for calculating the percentage of students with ID in mainstream schools were only available for Czechia, Germany, the Republic of Ireland and Poland. Similar to the trends in students with SEN, the population of students with intellectual disability in mainstream schools also increased during the points of time envisaged—with the most percentage points in Czechia (+8.53). Similarly, this trend happened at differing levels. For example, in Germany, the percentage of the population in focus increased from 4.07 to 11.85 percentage points, whereas in Poland it increased from 43.82 to 49.76. Thus, Poland is the country with the highest rate of the four countries of our sample with data that enabled us to calculate this indicator. However, it is obvious that Italy has a much higher rate of this population in mainstream schools than all other countries.²

Comparing the overall percentage of students with intellectual disability in mainstream settings with those with SEN, it becomes clear that the percentage of students with intellectual disability is considerably lower than that of students with SEN in all countries listed in Table 6. For example in Germany, the percentage points of students with SEN in mainstream settings increased from 2010/2011 to 2016/2017 from 25.26 to 43.39 (+17.83), whereas for students with intellectual disability it

²Even if all students in special schools ($n = 1408$) were students with intellectual disability, the percentage of students with intellectual disability in mainstream schools would still be by far higher than in all other countries of concern here.

TABLE 5
Percentage of students with SEN in mainstream settings with 80% time spent with peers in classroom

Country	Overall percentage mainstream 2010/2011	Overall percentage mainstream 2016/2017	Difference ±	Chi-square	Percentage mainstream primary education 2010/2011	Percentage mainstream primary education 2016/2017	Difference ±	Chi-square	Percentage mainstream secondary education 2010/2011	Percentage mainstream secondary education 2016/2017	Difference ±	Chi-square
Austria	57.94	68.74	+10.80	665.67***	65.04	69.32	+4.28	41.35***	53.97	68.36	+14.39	719.59***
Czechia	54.23	68.16	+13.93	3436.17***	58.20	69.13	+10.93	1061.92***	50.40	67.24	+16.84	2516.11***
Germany	25.26	43.39	+17.83	29436.23***	34.65	47.82	+13.17	6045.82***	18.14	40.37	+22.23	27861.92***
Greece	n/a	71.75	/	—	n/a	77.5	/	—	n/a	65.87	/	—
Ireland	80.28	79.45	-0.83	9.61**	69.17	81.73	+12.56	1341.20***	n/a	73.06	/	—
Italy	99.03	99.12	+0.09	126.16***	98.39	98.66	+0.27	21.78**	99.50	99.73	+0.23	225.95***
Poland	41.76	56.88	+15.12	6491.79***	54.33	61.03	+6.70	686.94***	31.90	50.07	+18.16	4378.61***

Key: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

TABLE 6
Percentage students with intellectual disability in mainstream settings with 80% time spent with peers in classroom primary/secondary longitudinal

Country	percentage points overall mainstream 2010/2011	percentage points overall mainstream 2016/2017	Difference ±	Chi-square	Percentage mainstream primary education 2010/2011	Percentage mainstream primary education 2016/2017	Difference ±	Chi-square	Percentage mainstream secondary education 2010/2011	Percentage mainstream secondary education 2016/2017	Difference ±	Chi-square
Czechia	5.04	13.57	+8.53	836.65***	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Germany	4.07	11.85	+7.78	3327.66***	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ireland	24.89	30.21	+5.32	42.85***	32.38	36.89	+4.51	16.09***	12.94	21.17	+8.23	42.85***
Poland	43.82	49.76	+5.94	388.33***	47.76	52.42	+4.66	123.91***	39.96	46.56	+6.60	230.97***

Key: *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 7
Exclusion rate of students with SEN longitudinal

Country	Exclusion rate of all students with SEN in compulsory education in		Exclusion rate of all students with SEN in compulsory education school year 2016/2017		Exclusion rate of students with SEN in compulsory education in primary education in 2010/2011		Exclusion rate of students with SEN in compulsory education in primary education in 2016/2017		Exclusion rate of students with SEN in compulsory education in secondary education in 2010/2011		Exclusion rate of students with SEN in compulsory education in secondary education in 2016/2017		Difference ±
	2010/2011	2016/2017	2016/2017	2016/2017	2010/2011	2016/2017	2010/2011	2016/2017	2010/2011	2016/2017	2010/2011	2016/2017	
Austria	1.60	1.04	1.04	0.73	1.12	0.73	1.12	0.73	1.94	1.42	1.94	1.42	-0.52
Czechia	3.97	3.17	3.17	2.48	3.14	2.48	3.14	2.48	5.05	4.22	5.05	4.22	-0.83
Germany	3.95	3.09	3.09	2.92	3.77	2.92	3.77	2.92	4.07	3.20	4.07	3.20	-0.87
Greece	3.02	1.10	1.10	0.67	3.22	0.67	3.22	0.67	2.54	1.72	2.54	1.72	-0.82
Ireland	1.15	1.42	1.42	1.25	n/a	1.25	n/a	1.25	n/a	1.93	n/a	1.93	n/a
Italy	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	-0.02
Poland	1.76	1.63	1.63	1.33	1.25	1.33	1.25	1.33	2.26	2.26	2.26	2.26	0

increased only from 4.07 to 11.85 (+7.78). Likewise, but on a different level, in Czechia, the percentage of students with SEN in mainstream schools rose from 54.23 to 68.16 (+13.93), while the percentage of students with intellectual disability just increased from 5.04 to 13.57 (+8.53).

Concerning the gap between primary and secondary education, as observed for the cohort of students with SEN, the numbers listed in Table 6 for school year 2010/2011 indicate also such a gap concerning the percentage of students with intellectual disability in mainstream schools—at least for the Republic of Ireland and Poland, the only two countries of our sample that could provide the needed figures for this calculation. However, in contrast to the population of students with SEN, even though the percentage of students with intellectual disability grew until 2016/2017 at both school stages, the gap remained.

So even where there is a tendency to position more students with intellectual disability in mainstream schools, this tendency does not affect students with intellectual disability as much as the overall population of students with SEN. Furthermore, the numbers indicate that, despite the increasing rates, the majority of students with intellectual disability in Czechia, Germany and the Republic of Ireland are still educated in segregated settings. In Poland, almost the half of all students with ID were educated in mainstream schools (49.76%).

Developments in the “Exclusion Rate”

A question which remains to be answered, is whether the tendencies identified above, that is, the increase of students with SEN and also intellectual disability in regular schools during the implementation process of the UNCRPD, are a result of a transfer of students from special to mainstream settings—as an increase of percentages can, statistically, also be a product of lower numbers of overall students or an increase of classifications of students in mainstream settings.

The so-called “exclusion rate” is defined as the percentage of students with an official decision (diagnosis) of SEN in special schools, based on the percentage of the enrolled school population. The “exclusion rate” is an indicator that is of significant relevance for comparison, as it relates to the numbers of students labeled as having SEN with the rates of their placements in special schools. In Table 7, we calculated the exclusion rate for students with SEN. In contrast to the former indicator, we did not calculate chi-square as this index is not based on a fully independent population.

As we can see, during the implementation process of the UNCRPD, the exclusion rate of students with SEN decreased in all countries. In Austria, Czechia, and Germany the rate dropped between -0.54 (Austria) and -0.86 (Germany). For Greece a strong decrease can be observed in the period of concern (-1.92). This points to a certain shift, from the placement of students with SEN in special schools, to mainstream settings.³

³Even though this shift can be considered as a result of political efforts to minimize the number of special schools, it is also linked to problematic aspects as well, as these efforts promoted “integration” in regular schools (e.g., by placing students in special classes or assigning them to parallel support) rather than inclusion.

TABLE 8
Exclusion rate of students with intellectual disability longitudinal

Country	Exclusion rate of all students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in 2010/2011	Exclusion rate of all students with intellectual disability in compulsory education school year 2016/2017	Difference ±	Exclusion rate of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in primary education in 2010/2011	Exclusion rate of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in primary education school year 2016/2017	Difference ±	Exclusion rate of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in secondary education in 2010/2011	Exclusion rate of students with intellectual disability in compulsory education in secondary education school year 2016/2017	Difference ±
Austria	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Czechia	2.52	1.30	-1.22	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Germany	0.99	1.03	+0.04	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Greece	0.39	0.40	+0.10	0.13	0.20	+0.07	0.53	0.67	+0.14
Ireland	0.75	0.71	-0.04	0.66	0.49	-0.17	0.53	0.67	+0.14
Italy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Poland	0.66	0.73	+0.07	0.62	0.54	-0.08	0.70	1.11	+0.41

However, drawing on the exclusion rate for 2016/2017, it has to be noted that Germany and Czechia still have rather high figures of that indicator, with more than 3.0 percentage points. Not surprisingly, the figure for Italy is very small. The figures of the other countries range between 1.04 (Austria) and 1.63 (Poland).

Interestingly, the calculations of this indicator show, both for school years 2010/2011 and 2016/2017, that the tendency outlined before—the decrease of the exclusion rate—took place in primary and secondary education (except Poland). Yet, in contrast to the calculations of the percentage of students with SEN in mainstream schools, we cannot observe an adjustment of the exclusion rate between segregated settings in primary and secondary education for Austria, Czechia, Germany and Greece. Remarkably, the exclusion rate at secondary level is lower than at primary level in Italy (0.01 vs. 0.04). Taking into account only the numbers for school year 2016/2017, even an overall decrease can be stated for Germany and Czechia, both countries still have a very high exclusion rate at secondary education. In sum, we can see that the overall tendency of a decrease of the exclusion rate in most countries did not affect the gap between primary and secondary education. Although this gap has been minimized in the period of concern, it is still obvious in all countries.

In contrast to the category of SEN, the exclusion rate of the population of students with intellectual disability decreased considerably only in Czechia (-1.22), as indicated in table 8. The Republic of Ireland shows a very slight reduction, while in Germany, Greece and Poland the figures even increased from 2010/2011 to 2016/2017.

Concerning the exclusion rate at differing stages, the gap between primary and secondary education was not affected. On the contrary, the percentage points for segregated schooling at secondary level increased over the implementation process of the UNCRPD—in Poland by 0.41.

Discussion

In the following sections, we discuss two different aspects of our results: First, we interrogate the availability of data on students with intellectual disability in relation to the obligations of the UNCRPD. Second, we take up the empirical results of students with SEN and students with intellectual disability concerning the implementation processes of the UNCRPD.

Students With Intellectual Disability as “the Hidden Population”

The indications of a *shortage of data on education and intellectual disability mark an important result of our inquiry*. As shown, there are huge differences concerning the availability of data on students with disabilities between countries—especially regarding students with intellectual disability. The “invisibilization” of persons with intellectual disability is not a new phenomenon. In their global report on education and students with disabilities, Inclusion International criticized this aspect, pointing to a lack of availability of diagnostic tools in

some countries (Inclusion International, 2009). However, as we argue, this cannot be the case for the education systems represented in our study, as students with intellectual disability are diagnosed—they just do not seem to be included in the official statistics on education in some European countries. In most German speaking countries, there is a reasonable sensitivity toward publishing data on persons with (intellectual) disabilities, as data on these populations were key for the mass murders of persons with disabilities during the Nazi Regime. However, as we argue, statistics can also be used to enforce human rights and dismantle exclusion and discrimination. The “invisibilization” of students with intellectual disability could be read as a technique to disguise disadvantages in the implementation of inclusive education for this population.

In Article 31, the UNCRPD demands signatory states “to collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable them to formulate and implement policies to give effect to the present Convention.” As we have seen, in relation to the implementation of inclusive education, data and statistics on educational placements and impairment matter—even though inclusive education is not about classifications of impairments. While some European countries seem to have considered these obligations, some have done so only partly, and others have not (e.g., Austria). In the latter, persons with intellectual disability remain a *hidden population under the umbrella of SEN*. In summary, it indicates that the lack of data on inclusive education creates a *lack of transparency in the implementation processes of the UNCRPD*.

Students With Intellectual Disability as the Least to Benefit From the Implementation of Article 24 of the UNCRPD

Due to the shortcomings in available data outlined in previous parts of the paper, our results need to be considered as tentative. However, we think that, despite the mentioned limitations, our study was successful in analyzing trends and the intertwined problems of the implementation of Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

First of all, we need to highlight that the implementation process led to specific progress in the field of inclusive education both for students with SEN and for students with intellectual disability. Available data point to an increase of the percentage of both groups in mainstream schools. However, there are some problems linked to that progress that we now discuss.

Concerning the population of students with SEN, data indicate an increase of the percentage points of students with SEN placed in mainstream settings in all countries except the Republic of Ireland. The gap between the percentages of this group of students in primary and secondary education seems to have been reduced, as figures of that indicator in secondary mainstream settings approached those in primary education. However, even these results point to a trend in placements of students in favor of mainstream schools, it needs to be clear that, except in Italy, relatively high percentages of students with SEN are still educated in segregated settings. The same goes for the “exclusion rate.” Even though the figures for that indicator decreased in all countries, there are still some education systems

with a very high “exclusion rate,” for example, Germany and Czechia.

However, the trends in placements can be interpreted as a result of various political efforts. In most countries, action plans for implementing the UNCRPD were put into force at national and regional levels, involving measures to strengthen inclusive education and encourage parents to choose a mainstream school for their child with a disability (e.g., Austria, Germany, Poland). Yet, even though these actions led to more students with SEN in mainstream schools, the quality of education and support in these schools varies considerably, as recent studies focusing on the micro level of schooling have shown (e.g., Nes, Demo, & Ianes, 2018; Szumski & Karwowski, 2014; Vlachou & Fyssa, 2016). Indeed, some students are placed in mainstream schools, but do not participate as their peers without the label of SEN in social and academic learning (Vlachou & Papananou, 2015). Furthermore, the increase of students with SEN being placed in mainstream schools is not necessarily a sign for dismantling the separated school system—as the identification rates (rate of students diagnosed as having SEN in relation to the overall population of students) of Czechia, Germany, the Republic of Ireland, and Poland increased as well in the period of concern (see Table A1 in Appendix). Thus, the increase in the percentage of students with SEN in mainstream schools might be also a result of an increase of diagnosis in mainstream schools in the respective countries. Hence, the trend of progress in placements needs to be researched critically further at micro as well macro levels of the education system.

With regard to the reduction of segregated schooling, it needs to be noted critically that most of the mentioned action plans do not include mandatory measures to systematically reduce special schools and transfer resources into inclusive education. Most policies are still focused on special educational resources rather than on a restructuring process of school as a whole, in order to make it suitable for the needs of all students. Thus, segregated education of students with disabilities remains an option—for school administration and parents. The latter aspect, the *persistence of segregated schooling* despite the efforts in relation to Article 24 of the UNCRPD, affects students with intellectual disability specifically, as we discuss below.

As shown, the trend of increasing placements in mainstream settings applies to students with intellectual disability as well—but only to a certain degree. When comparing figures of students with intellectual disability with the population of students with SEN in mainstream schools, it becomes clear that, despite the overall increase of placements, the *percentage of students with intellectual disability is still much lower than that of students with SEN*. Furthermore, the gap between primary and secondary education remained on a rather consistent level for students with intellectual disability. This gap can be interpreted as an effect of the increase of curricular demands that come along with secondary education—an increase that often has been considered as a challenge for practitioners in inclusive settings (Biewer, Böhm, & Schütz, 2015; Biewer, Buchner, et al., 2015). As we would argue, the increasing curricular demands are often challenging for students as well, especially when they are reduced to raising cognitive ability expectations. Furthermore, some studies point to a decrease of social

participation of students with SEN, most notably of students with intellectual disability (Schwab, 2015).

Comparing the percentage of students with intellectual disability in mainstream schools across countries, Poland shows a high and increasing percentage over the period of concern. Firstly, this can be read as result of a consequent pro-inclusive education policy over the course of the last 30 years. In addition, Poland changed its financial policy regarding students with SEN in mainstream classrooms, affecting personal resources in a positive way. Thus, learning environments were equipped with more special education teachers or paraprofessionals. The increase in personnel resources might be the reason for an increase of placements of students with intellectual disability in mainstream classrooms (Ryndak et al., 2014).

Concerning segregated schooling in relation to the population of students with intellectual disability, a substantial decrease in the exclusion rate can only be traced for Czechia. In three countries, the percentage even increased over the implementation process. Thus, we conclude that for this indicator, in most countries, compared with the population of students with SEN, differing or even no dynamics can be observed. Therefore, the group of *students with intellectual disability can be considered as the “key population” of the special school system.*

The failures in the implementation of inclusive education conserve, as we argue, well-established systems of segregated schooling and disadvantages for students with intellectual disability. It seems to be supported by a persistent, ableist ideology linked to educational spaces and structures we can find in almost all countries of concern here: such ideologies encompass the assumption that special schools provide more appropriate educational support for some learners (Hornby, 2015). These assumptions are well inscribed in extra curricula for students with intellectual disabilities in some countries, which at large do not relate to the curricula for regular students and encourage teachers to separate students according to their curricula in mainstream schools—which affects most strongly students with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, this ideology is supported by a certain design of teacher education programs, which do not focus on equipping preservice teachers with the skills for mass tailored support according to the individual needs of learners, but more on teaching in relation to categories of impairments (Buchner & Proyer, 2020). In addition, within a meritocratic school system, underpinned with neoliberal ideals of self-optimization and the interlinked ability expectations, it is not surprising that children and young persons with intellectual disability are constructed as a group of persons who are “hard to be included.”

Conclusion: The Persistent Exclusion of Students With Intellectual Disability From Mainstream Education

This paper is concerned with the progress of the implementation of Article 24 of the UNCRPD in different European countries. As shown, there are positive trends regarding the percentage of students with SEN and intellectual disability in mainstream schools. However, as we have demonstrated, students with intellectual disability do not benefit from these developments to the same extent as

learners considered as having SEN. In fact, in most countries examined, the vast majority of students with intellectual disability are still excluded from mainstream education. This can be, at least concerning the countries involved in our study, considered as an “*international*” phenomenon or a *common reality* in European countries.

The results also indicate a lack of data on this population in relation to inclusive education—an issue that hinders even further the design and development of a strategic plan concerning the inclusion of students with intellectual disability.

As far as the latter aspect is concerned, it seems that an important step toward an improved monitoring of the implementation of Article 24 of the UNCRPD would be to publish detailed data on placements in relation to gender, location (federal states, urban vs. rural), first language, race, class and, as discussed, type of impairment. As mentioned, national statistics with at least some of the mentioned categories exist (e.g., in Poland or Czechia). Furthermore, data as compiled within the annual school census undertaken in the United Kingdom or the US Department of Education’s National and State Statistics on children and students with disabilities served under IDEA, could serve as promising examples that allow for deeper analysis than the available official data that we were able to draw upon for this paper.

However, what is still missing is a rationale with different types of impairments that allows for comparison of the quality of inclusive education across countries, such as outcomes in relation to academic learning, social participation, for example. For future research, it would be helpful to provide researchers with the opportunities to track the educational trajectories of individuals, by allowing researchers to follow students over time and link student data in relation to school year and type of school with types of impairment, gender and other relevant variables. In some countries, such as Austria, this is impossible due to the laws governing education. Qualitative studies on the micro level of inclusive education, including the voices of students with intellectual disability, can offer a better understanding of the benefits but also the barriers and complexities encountered in implementing inclusive education. In other words, (comparative) research should not only focus on numerical data but also on students’ experiences from schools, what and how they learn and if this enables them to become active citizens. Some European comparative research, using a mixed methods approach, such as the Quali-TYDES project (Biewer et al., 2015; Buchner et al., 2015), can be considered as promising in this regard. In addition, comparative research should also include the perspectives of parents and practitioners.

Concerning the persistent exclusion of students with intellectual disability, we consider the following aspects as key to understanding this type of exclusion. The dual system approach, combined with a lack of comprehensive financing strategies supporting inclusive education can be considered as key barriers to implementing inclusive education broadly (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016b). Thus, even though most policies on inclusive education and the accompanying rhetoric aim to include all learners, most European states have not geared their efforts up toward a one-track approach and conducted the necessary structural reforms to achieve this aim. The example of Italy illustrates that such an approach can

have a strong impact on the population of students with intellectual disability.

However, competing discourses of what good education is about, such as the optimization of individuals to make them “job ready” rather than educated and the untouched meritocratic pillars of European education systems, need to be considered as barriers for implementing inclusive education for all, especially for students who are thought to lack essential cognitive abilities. All too often, the coexistence of the norms of inclusion and neoliberalism produce grotesque ideas of “inclusive education,” including ability grouping and the segregation of certain students from classroom activities in mainstream schools (Hedegard-Soerensen & Penthin Grumloese, 2018)—and, as our results show, the exclusion of students with intellectual disability in special schools. These structural problems generate practitioners’ beliefs of students with intellectual disability as unable or hard to be included (Tsokova & Becirevic, 2009). All too often, as discussed, these assumptions are the result of a certain structure of teacher education, that overemphasizes impairment-related special education and fails to equip student teachers with knowledge and skills on inter-disciplinary collaboration, cooperative teaching, group work, curriculum modifications and/or differentiations, whole class teaching strategies and individualized learning. However, the implementation process of Article 24 of the UNCRPD included strong efforts from many countries to improve teacher training for inclusive education over the last decade (Florian & Camedda, 2020)—but these changes need to be significantly enhanced in order to have impact on the school system.

Last but not least, we think that inclusion of persons with intellectual disability and their families in the implementation processes of Article 24 would help to combat the exclusion of this population, as it has the potential to make their views, needs and experiences visible.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1
Identification rate of students with SEN longitudinal

Country	Overall identification rate 2010/2011	Identification rate SEN school year 2016/2017	Difference ±
Austria	3.79	3.34	-0.45
Czech Republic	8.67	9.96	+1.29
Germany	5.28	5.45	+0.17
Greece	n/a	6.80	n/a
Ireland	5.85	6.93	+1.08
Italy	4.11	3.55	-0.56
Poland	3.03	3.77	+0.74