

# Case studies on curriculum, pedagogy, and social climate interventions tackling inequalities

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **ISOTIS consortium** aims to understand and contribute to solutions on how Europe may tackle early and persistent social and educational inequalities. As schools and classrooms consist of important levels of analysis and intervention to reach this ambitious goal, it is imperative that we understand how to design and implement curricula, pedagogies, and school social climate interventions that effectively promote inclusiveness and belongingness.

In this report, we present and discuss the findings of **seven in-depth case studies** of curriculum, pedagogy, and/or social climate interventions currently ongoing in seven European countries, from distinct geographic regions, diverse in their income levels, research traditions, education and welfare systems, and immigrant integration policies: England, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal.

Within the **conceptual framework** of the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), multicultural education (Banks, 2015), and multiculturalism as a policy (Berry, 1984, 2013), our **goal** is to describe the key **success features** and the main **facilitators** of promising interventions, approaches, programs, or projects tackling educational inequalities through curriculum design and implementation, classroom practices, and/or school social climate, in early childhood education and in primary school. By identifying success features and facilitators in diverse innovative and promising interventions, across multiple education systems, we aim to strengthen the current knowledge base on potential transferable solutions for promoting inclusiveness and belongingness across European classrooms and schools, thus informing researchers, practitioners, and policymakers on potential paths to move the field forward. We also aim to identify **obstacles** experienced within selected interventions, while describing and analysing the types of solutions identified or previously tested and, thus, retrieving additional lessons from ongoing efforts.

Regarding our **findings**, across case studies, we identified **success features** that cover the range of ecological levels of analysis: individual, microsystem (including patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations), mesosystem (focusing on connecting school and families as well as professionals), and exosystem (focusing on mobilizing external resources to support schools and professionals). We also identified success features focusing on supporting school culture and values, highlighting the nature of the school as a cultural microsystem (Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Opppenheimer, Vega-Molina, & García Coll, 2017).

We further identified **facilitators**, closely related to success features, and that address a wide range of factors, including the focus of the interventions; operational dimensions related to program design and implementation; staff characteristics, involvement, and commitment; strong leadership; and family involvement. Importantly, a key success feature in one intervention (such as family involvement) may be a facilitator in a different intervention. The way forward for some interventions may be to incorporate current facilitators as explicit or intrinsic features of the intervention, thus maximizing their potential positive effects.

We also identified and discussed **obstacles** covering a wide range of issues, including funding; program design; combined or multigrade classrooms; children's mobility; staff beliefs and

attitudes, limited training and/or experience, fatigue, and turnover; family/parental disconnection and insufficient involvement; language (including ambivalence in Roma communities regarding the integration of the Roma language in the curriculum); and difficult cooperation with other (semi)professional organizations in the community.

Our discussion of the success features, facilitators, and obstacles identified within the seven case studies has important **implications**. The first implication is that much can be done at all levels of the ecological system that is the school and the school community, and a wide range of options is available for practitioners and policy makers. Indeed, although positive influences and supports are required from more distal levels, most success features are located within activity settings, highlighting the significant role of teachers and other practitioners. Further, although examples of intervention features could be identified for most dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 2015), content integration, equity pedagogies, prejudice reduction activities, empowering school cultures, and, especially, critical approaches to the knowledge construction process, do not seem to be consistently at the centre of intervention design nor do they come together often within transformative interventions. Notably, reduction of prejudice and discrimination does not seem to be explicitly addressed as a goal, with implications for programme design.

In sum, we found **great variation** within selected interventions suggesting a range of solutions is available to tackle social and educational inequalities. We studied interventions that tackle inequalities at the **school level**, based on a clear funding strategy, strong commitment from leadership, and an embedded professional-development component, either building on available resources or allocating specialized resources to provide onsite support to individual professionals and the whole organization. However, we also studied interventions that tackle inequalities by providing additional support to selected children at risk for social and educational inequalities, based on additional activities, delivered within the school, but designed and implemented by external resources, funded through (often temporary) local projects. These **local targeted interventions** are valuable for schools as they tackle (i.e., compensate for) school limitations in addressing the needs of children at risk of or already experiencing inequalities by mobilizing key community resources. Therefore, external resources can be essential in bringing about desired changes in school practices and social climate towards equity and belongingness. Such external resources can be mobilized through different solutions that ensure stability in implementation, such as allocating structural funds to schools to acquire external services or giving municipalities a prominent (funding) role in orchestrating partnerships between schools and external organizations.

Based on our findings, we **recommend** an expanded and comprehensive view of the conditions needed to design and implement successful interventions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), going beyond activities, roles, and relationships within classroom settings to include reciprocal family-school relationships; staff selection, training, and continuing supports; as well as embeddedness in a strong institutional equity culture (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). We further argue that the five dimensions of the multicultural education framework (Banks, 2015) merit greater consideration and integration to ensure school transformation towards equity. Importantly, such dimensions may serve as paths to value heritage cultures and promote positive contact more systematically. Finally, consistent with previous work (Aguilar, Silva, et al., 2017), findings suggest the key role of high-quality research designs to ensure success in developing and implementing effective interventions.

Subsequent steps within ISOTIS include the development of a virtual learning environment prototype aiming to support school professionals in developing cultural awareness and plurilingual competence in children (and families). Based on lessons learned from the analysis of the seven case studies, we formulate **implications for ISOTIS' future work** on curriculum, pedagogy, and social climate. Such recommendations encompass features of high-quality program design; alignment with school needs, values, and culture; family participation; frequent, regular, and increasingly more complex use by target groups; and sustainability.

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**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT  
TO TACKLE INEQUALITIES IN SOCIETY**



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