

SCHOOL GARDENS FOR FUTURE CITIZENS

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**The inclusion context and dimension of the
learning activities in the schools**



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The inclusion context and dimension of the learning activities in the schools



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INTRODUCTION

eSGarden – School Gardens for Future Citizens (2018-ES01-KA201-050599) is an international strategic partnership of cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices that aims to improve the quality of education and develop students' skills towards cultural diversity, sustainable development, and citizenship through a transversal integration of technology in all schooling levels around a real-life use of school gardens. Transferring technological advances to our society and especially to schools is the base of this project in which universities, schools and civil society organizations from Greece, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain collaborate bearing in mind contemporary concerns with the environment, sustainability and the digital transition. Our goal is to enhance the digital era with the mission of educating our young people and children in equality, sustainability and respect for the environment, with the essential support of technology. For education and innovative practices in a digital age, the project enabled innovative practices that connect the virtual and real world with the aim of motivating student learning. In addition, the project aimed to transfer to students the creation of a digital environment that would transform hands-on garden work on data visualization and analysis.

The development of more inclusive educational practices was also highlighted, just as much in the set of competences that were prioritized for the learning activities designed and implemented in schools, as with the integration of a partner school – *Agrupamento de Escolas de Paredes* (School Cluster of Paredes) – from Portugal, that had extensive experience with working with diverse students, with diverse learning difficulties and cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, as a part of quality evaluation, this report is a product of a monitoring focus on the promotion of inclusion through the development and implementation of learning activities in eSGarden's partners schools. We start by contextualizing inclusive education in the main international policy documents and in the educational systems in which the partner schools are included and present, afterwards, a few reflective notes on the impacts of the project on the participant students as perceived by the teachers, ending with a more thorough reflective analysis of the case of the participant students from the School Cluster of Paredes, some of them being accompanied by a unit of support to students with disabilities.

1. Development of inclusive education policy in Europe

Mainly since the 1990s, there have been several guidelines from international organizations for the implementation of an education policy for all. Figure 1 illustrates the international declarations and conventions with the greatest impact on the elaboration of legal texts for the development of national educational policies.

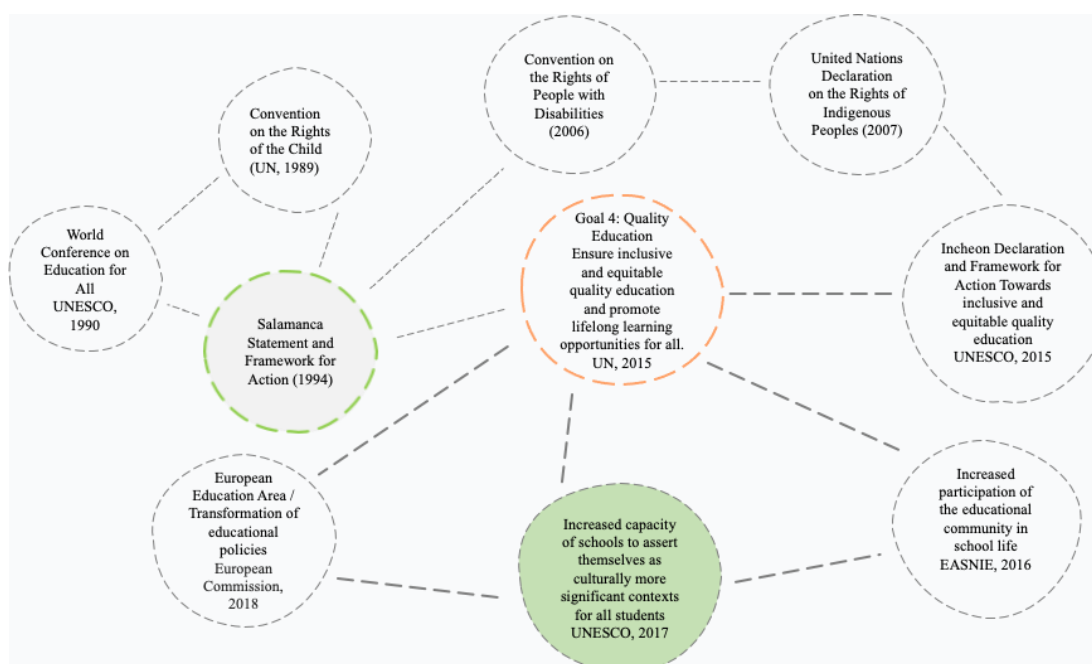


Figure 1: Positions and guidelines of international organizations on inclusive education. Source: author's own.

In 1994, the World Conference on Special Education was held in Salamanca, with the representation of 92 governments and 25 international organizations, in which the right of all students to be part of the regular education system was proclaimed, and, consequently, the need for planning and programming of education systems according to the diversity of the characteristics of each person.

At the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon, representatives from 160 countries established measures to be implemented over the following 15 years to achieve inclusive education for all. This declaration ratifies, after years, the worldwide *Education for All* movement, which began in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, and was reiterated in Dakar, in the year of 2000. Since then, with the World Conference on Education for All commitment in DAKAR, the interest of international organizations in solving social problems and improving the quality of education in all signatory countries is reaffirmed.

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) launched the 2030 Agenda with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and regarding education, the objective is to “Ensure access to inclusive, quality and equitable education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” (Goal 4, SDG). The following year, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EADSNIE) recommends increased participation of the educational community in school life (EADSNE, 2003). And one year later, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines *inclusive education* as increased capacity of schools to assert themselves as culturally more significant contexts for all students, promoting their participation in the construction of their educational project (UNESCO, 2017); and also in 2017 the European Commission pointed out the need for changes in the policies and practices of education systems (EC, 2018).

2. Characteristics of policies for inclusive education

For a long time, inclusive education policy discourses were closely linked to the inclusion of people with special educational needs in the education system, as can be seen in figure 1. With the need to include people with other types of barriers to inclusion in the education system, in 2002, the Index for Inclusion was published, in which the concept of “barriers to learning and participation” (BLP) was introduced in the Index for inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). From here, this concept is adopted to represent all the difficulties in accessing the national curriculum.

The processes for the inclusion of students with barriers to learning and participation (BLP) in the school curriculum have been organised in different ways in Europe, which led to a study carried out by EADSNE (2003) that allowed grouping inclusive education policies into three categories: "one-track approach", "multi-track approach" and "two-track approach", as shown in figure 2.

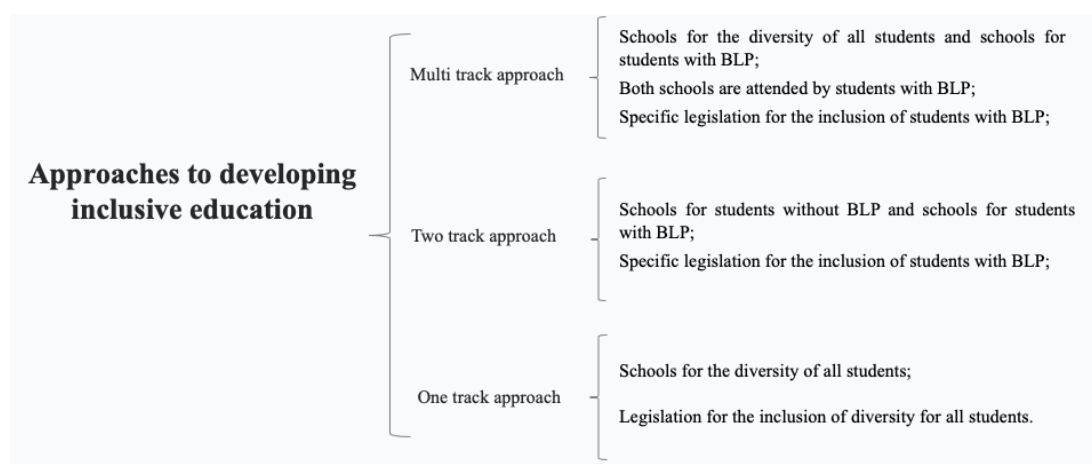


Figure 2: Approaches to developing inclusive education. Source: author's own.

The one-track approach category concerns those countries that develop policies aimed at the inclusion of all students in the same system and is carried out through a set of services that intervene in that system (the only one that exists).

The multi-track approach category encompasses those countries that have a multiple approach to inclusion, with the existence of differentiated educational responses for students who present BLP in the common national curriculum.

The two-track approach category includes countries that have in place two educational systems, one for learners who present BLP in the national curriculum and another for those who do not.

3. Framework of policies towards the development of inclusive education in Portugal, Spain, Greece and Slovenia

Based on this classification proposed by EASNIE (2003), we have framed the education systems of the four countries involved in the eSGarden project, trying to understand which approach – *one-track*, *multi-track*, *two-track* – is closest to each one.

In this sense, we analysed the legal texts from Portugal, Spain, Greece and Slovenia, oriented towards the development of inclusive education policies; we consulted the teachers from each country involved in the project to know their perceptions about the organisation of their education system; and we considered the students' answers on the items related to diversity and inclusion. From the analysis of this data, we present our conclusions on the category that best characterises each of these four education systems.

3.1 Approach to inclusive education policy in Portugal

Nowadays, in Portugal, where School Cluster of Paredes (AVEP), an eSGarden partner school organization is located, the policy framework for inclusive education is getting closer to the "one-track approach" category.

Decree-Law 54/2018, which establishes the legal regime of inclusive education, announces three levels of educational measures to support learning and inclusion – universal, selective and additional –, to be applied according to the profile of each student, decompartmentalizing regular education and special education. Thus, any student can benefit from one of these educational measures, temporarily or permanently, in the whole school curriculum or in part of the curriculum. The determination of the appropriated educational measures is done by a multidisciplinary team of support to inclusive education that each school must have, being usually composed by a representative member of the school board, the student's class director, a special education teacher, a psychologist, the guardian, the student, and other elements deemed necessary.

Universal measures are intended for all students; can be applied by the teacher without the intervention of the multidisciplinary team; are aimed at promoting participation and improving learning; and include pedagogical differentiation and small group support.

Selective measures apply when universal measures are found to be insufficient; they include non-significant adaptations to the curriculum; psycho-pedagogical support; and tutorial support.

Additional measures apply when universal measures and selective measures are not sufficient; they include significant curricular adaptations, individual educational programs, substitutive learning and individual plans for transition to adulthood, all established in the decree-law.

In order to implement selective or additional measures, there must be an evaluation of the student's performance, which is carried out by the school's multidisciplinary support team for inclusive education.

3.2 Approach to inclusive education policy in Autonomous Community of Valencia (Spain)

Spain is made up of seventeen autonomous communities, each one with specific legislative autonomy and executive powers. Thus, it was of interest for this report to analyze the specific legal text with guidelines for inclusive education of the Autonomous Community of Valencia, where Colegio La Purísima Franciscanas, an eSGarden partner school organization, is located.

The legal text under analysis is decree-law 104/2018, which establishes the principles of equity and inclusion in the Valencian educational system. In this legal text, four levels of educational responses for inclusion are foreseen: level I measures, level II measures, level III measures, and level IV measures.

Response level I addresses the whole educational community and the school's relations with the socio-community environment. It includes strategies for planning, managing and organizing the school's support. It is up to the school's governing and coordinating bodies, according to their competencies, to propose and approve these measures. Measures that include the participation of people or entities outside the school must be agreed upon and specified with the agents involved. The documents that specify the measures of the first response level are the school's educational project and the action plan for improvement.

Level II response measures can be applied to any student, with the teacher having the autonomy to decide what kind of support is appropriate for each student, among which are foreseen: educational reinforcement and extension measures; counseling and psychological support; small group support; and pedagogical reinforcement and inclusive organizational and methodological strategies.

Level III response measures are applied exclusively to students with clinically diagnosed difficulties. Generally, students with characteristics such as hyperactivity, dyslexia, dyscalculia, and giftedness, among others, fall into this level. The strategies provided at this

level are: non-significant curricular adaptations; psycho-pedagogical support; and individual tutorial support.

Level IV measures are applied exclusively to students with diagnosed special needs. The strategies defined at this level are significant curricular adaptations, individual educational program (according to the student's profile) and support with a specialist in therapeutic pedagogy.

From the above, the policy framework for inclusive education in the Autonomous Community of Valencia, seems to fit into the category of *one-track approach*.

3.3 Approach to inclusive education policy in Greece

In Greece, the legal framework for the development of inclusive education is Law Nº. 3699 of 2008, 2nd October, which is exclusively related to special care and the education of people with disabilities or medically diagnosed special educational needs. Thus, all the educational measures established in this law are foreseen, exclusively, for students with disabilities and associated special education needs.

Article 3 of the law defines students with disabilities and/or special education needs as those who have significant difficulties in learning for the whole or some period of their school life, due to sensory, intellectual, cognitive or developmental problems, mental health and neuropsychological disorders that affect the process of their school adjustment and learning.

Also according to this legal text, pupils with complex cognitive, emotional and social difficulties, delinquent behavior because of abuse, parental neglect and abandonment or domestic violence, and students with one or more special intellectual skills and talents are considered to have BLP; on the other hand, students with low academic achievement and/or students with learning difficulties that derive from external factors, such as linguistic or cultural diversity, are not considered to have a disability.

According to Article 6, paragraph 1, as amended, (Law 3699/2008), access to mainstream school for students with disabilities and/or special education needs takes place in the following contexts:

- 1) In a regular education class, with the support of the class teacher; this situation is provided for students with milder difficulties.
- 2) In a mainstream class with parallel individualized support provided by special education teachers; this is provided for pupils who can follow the ordinary school

curriculum with appropriate individualized support and also for pupils with severe special educational needs who do not have a special school in their local area.

3) In specially organized classes with specialized professionals, operating in regular schools. This measure provides for two types of educational programs: common but specialized program, up to 15 hours per week; and personalized extended-hour program for pupils with more severe needs.

These types of educational measures foreseen to operate in mainstream schools meet the needs of the majority of students with disabilities and/or BLP. When attendance of students with disabilities and/or BLP becomes particularly difficult in mainstream schools because of their needs, the following measures are provided:

- 1) attend special education schools;
- 2) attend schools or departments that operate as autonomous units or annexes of other schools within certain hospitals, rehabilitation units, discipline institutions for the under-aged, chronic disease institutions that include children with disabilities;
- 3) receive tuition at home if they cannot attend school because of health problems.

Students with other characteristics and difficulties are not covered by this legal regulation and therefore cannot benefit from these educational support measures.

From the above, the policy framework for inclusive education in Greece, seems to fit into the category of *multi-track approach*.

3.4 Approach to inclusive education policy in Slovenia

In Slovenia, the legal framework of the educational policy for the inclusion of students with BLP is constituted by two legal norms: Orientation of Children with Special Needs Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 58/11, 40/12 - ZUJF, 90/12, 41/17 - ZOPOPP and 200/20 - ZOOMTVI); and Rules on additional professional and physical assistance for children with special needs (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 88/13 and 108/21).

This legislation provides several types of educational programs, including two programs with adapted provision and additional specialised assistance aimed at students who are able to achieve the goals of the mainstream elementary curriculum, and two programs with lower performance criteria aimed at students with intellectual disabilities. An individual school can offer multiple programs simultaneously, but in the case of students with

higher barriers, they are in most cases provided in specialised educational institutions, and very rarely in classes within mainstream schools.

There is a Concept of Working with Pupils with Learning Difficulties (LD) which is only applied to pupils with mild and moderate LD. The aim is to improve academic skills and optimise learning opportunities in mainstream classes. The approach involves introducing a five-step hierarchical model that addresses support for academic competence. Teachers may initially provide less intensive support for learning, using individualised and differentiated approaches. When LD worsen despite teacher support, school counselling services intervene. If intervention also proves insufficient, support involving experts for additional individual and group assistance is introduced. At all levels of support, specialised professionals are required to evaluate and monitor progress.

According to this description, the policy framework for inclusive education in Slovenia, seems to fit into the category of *multi-track approach*.

4. Impact of the project on the development of inclusive education

According to the information in the previous section, differences in legislation, assessment procedures and configuration of each education system determine the development of policies for inclusive education in each country. This explains why the schools involved in the project have relevant differences with regard to the diversity of students and the number of teachers involved in the activities, the way they continued the project during a pandemic and how they contributed to social cohesion. In Table 1 we present data to contextualize issues of inclusion in the learning activities designed and implemented by the partner schools, namely, the representativity of students with BLP in the activities, such as characteristics of these students and the cooperation of teachers in the project.

Table 1 : Data on participants on the learning activities

Activities	School	Level	Age range of students	Students	Students with BLP	Types of BLP	Teachers involved
Do you know what you cook?	La Purissima	7	12;13	30	9	Dyslexia; ADHD	5
A multiperspective approach to Valencian gardens	La Purissima	9	14;15	87	17	Dyslexia; ADHD	15
Intelligent Weather Station	La Purissima	10	14;15;17;18	50	3	ADHD; Visual difficulties	1
Smell and learn: getting to know a school garden	La Purissima	5	10; 11; 12	59	11	Dyslexia; ADHD; High capacities	1
3199: an odyssey into the garden legacy (tandem activity)	Primary Preveza	6	12	20	0	-----	1
Compost is nature's treasure	Primary Preveza	6	12	19	0	-----	1
Eating a healthy mediterranean diet	Primary Preveza	4	10;11;12	27	1	ADHD; Learning difficulties	2
ECO Crafts	Primary Preveza	6	12	19	0	-----	1
Water	Smartno	9	15	42	4	Learning difficulties; Diabetes; Dyslexia	2
Grow, recycle & eat locally	Smartno	4	9;10	26	3	Learning difficulties; Diabetes	1
Water is life	Smartno	8	13;14;15	21	1	Dyslexia	4
Healthy life – Healthy planet	Smartno	8	13;14;15	21	1	Dyslexia	7
G(r)ow Greens!	AVEP	6	11;12	29	8 + 5	Intellectual disabilities + Learning difficulties	10
e-twinning 3199: an odyssey into the garden legacy	AVEP	6	11;12	29	8 + 5	Intellectual disabilities + Learning difficulties	10
Mission: possible, healthy eating	AVEP	6	11;12	29	8 + 5	Intellectual disabilities + Learning difficulties	10
Garden up!	AVEP	6	11;12	29	8 + 5	Intellectual disabilities + Learning difficulties	10

BLP: *Barriers to learning and participation* (Booth & Ainscow, 2002)

ADHD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

The most relevant differences that we can observe in the four countries are the number of students with BLP who participated in the activities, the characteristics of the students, and the number of teachers involved, differences that result precisely from the configuration of the educational systems of each project partner country, with regard to their approach to education policy.

In general, all schools integrated in the project students with BLP but minor limiting barriers (more commonly learning difficulties and dyslexia), which is reflected in the number of teachers involved in the activities. Moreover, only one activity from La Purisima (Spain) and all from AVEP (Portugal) seem to have involved all the majority of teachers from the participating students. Both educational systems of these two schools – from Portugal and from the Autonomous Community of Valencia (Spain) – are close to the “one track approach” to the development of inclusive education. In AVEP (Portugal), besides the main group of students involved in the project (21) that had five students with learning difficulties requiring some additional support, another group of 8 students with severe intellectual disabilities participated in the projects’ activities, in articulation with the previous group of students. These 8 students were supported by a special education teacher, also in the eSGarden’s team. However, we highlight that the participation of teachers from different disciplinary fields made it possible for the project activities to integrate contents from various fields of knowledge, with different levels of learning and different forms of participation (including in person, at a distance and synchronously (live videos between students who were at school and the students who watched from home)).

5. The case of the students from the School Cluster of Paredes

The School Cluster of Paredes (AVEP) was included as partner school of the eSGarden project to enrich the partners' experience of knowledge transfer regarding inclusion issues due to their high experience with diverse profiles of students in which concerns barriers to learning and participation in the common national curriculum, mainly in relation to intellectual disabilities. In Portugal, inclusive education policy is framed within a one-track approach implying a curriculum and pedagogical design and implementation for a large heterogeneity of students in the same learning context. That is why the team of 4 teachers from this school that participated in the project involved not only a Science, an English and a Visual Education teacher, but also a Special Education teacher that worked with students with disabilities that involved severe learning difficulties. Consequently, these school participated with two groups of students who worked collaboratively on the learning activities. The first was a whole-class group (n=21), that started the project in their 5th year of schooling (ages 10 to 11) and participated in the project until the end of their 6th year of schooling (ages 11 to 12). This included five students with learning difficulties requiring additional support measures from their regular teachers, including the English, the Science and the Visual Education teachers on the team. The second was a group of eight students with severe intellectual disabilities caused by moderate or severe cognitive development delay, spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, trisomy 21 with psychomotor hypotonia, Rubinstein Taybi syndrome and west syndrome. These eight students were accompanied mainly by the Special Education teacher, though engaging in the learning activities in close relationship with the students from the other group.

The competences diagnose questionnaire prepared by the University of Porto (UP) team, to be completed by the participating students from the four countries, at the beginning and at the end of the project, did not fit the profile of these eight students, who did not have the autonomy to fulfill it on their own. In alternative, the UP team and the AVEP teachers met and considered that the best way to assess the competences of these students would be through another data collection instrument, a competences observation grid to be filled in by the teachers who have accompanied this group of students for longer periods including throughout the eSGarden's activities. The UP team designed a grid divided into five blocks of major competences: school climate and inclusion; digital technologies; personal achievement as learner; European awareness; and gardening and sustainability. This instrument was mobilized in two moments, at the beginning and at the end of the project. At the beginning of the project, the special education teacher from the AVEP team who has

known this group of students the longest filled in a grid for each student, which was the competences diagnosis. For the completion, the teacher relied on his previous knowledge about this group of students and the perceptions of other teachers who know the group. At the end of the project, the UP team met and interviewed this special education teacher to analyse the progress of each student's competences, with reference to the five key competences raised in the grid, the diagnosis collected with the first application of the grid, and the evidence collected throughout the development of the project. In this interview, the teacher presented records collected by him and the other teachers involved in the project, such as photographs, videos, dialogues with students and between students, portfolios and other students' work, feedback from parents, staff and other teachers.

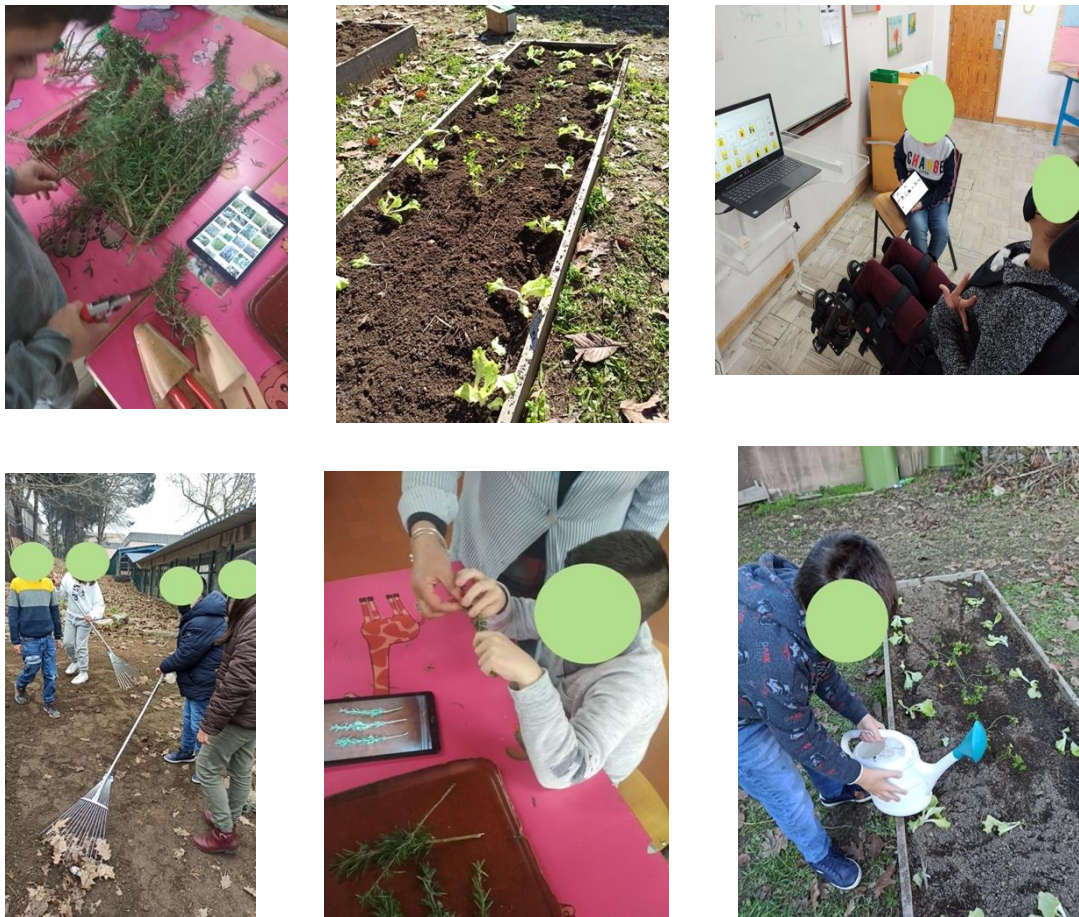


Figure 3: Photographic record of activities. Author: Manuel Aguiar (Special Education Teacher)

Although unexpectedly on the application, the impacts of the eSGarden learning activities implemented in this school, in terms of inclusion of students with BLP, were clearer and more impressive during the confinements caused by the covid-19 pandemic. This is

because, during these periods, the learning activities of the eSGarden project served as important links between the group of students with BLP whose curriculum has significant adaptations (and for this reason continued attending the school in-presence) and the rest of the group that started to have distance classes. The group of students with BLP continued the garden activities in the school, recorded several moments in photographs and made live videos broadcasted to the other students in the class who were having classes at home. Thus, the continuity of the project during the pandemic provided an opportunity for the group of students with BLP to be perceived as a resource, both by themselves and their classmates (with whom they were always in contact and often online) and by the other actors involved, such as teachers, therapists and family.

In a discussion meeting with the team of teachers from AVEP, we reflected on the changes on the students provoked or influenced by the development of the project's learning activities. It was noted that there was a relevant increase in interactions between all students in the class, including, of course, the increase in interactions between students with BLP in the national core curriculum and students without these barriers. In addition, students without BLP expressed recognition for the abilities of their peers with BLP and also a greater understanding of their characteristics, demonstrating their ability to design solutions based on the characteristics of their peers. This was visible throughout the project, especially since the class was divided and students with BLP continued with classes at school and students without BLP went home with distance learning. The confinement resulting from the measures to restrict the pandemic, forced a replanning of project activities and, at this time, the teachers planned the activities so that students with BLP became the link between students who were at home and the activities of the project. This enabled that students without BLP became dependent of the active participation of students with BLP so that activities related to the garden could continue, which allowed them to recognize their skills, and improve their views and awareness, not only of their colleagues with BLP limitations, but also of their potential.

Even in the case of one student who showed residual interaction with her colleagues throughout the project – which is to be expected according to her profile (she does not like changes or contacts outside her very restricted group) – the truth is that after evaluating the whole process, the supporting teacher recognized that today she tolerates better the presence of other people, other colleagues, which is a positive change in her behaviour and also an alert for the professionals around her to other possibilities that can be explored.

Throughout the project there was also an increase in cooperation between the teachers involved in the project, especially when activities had to be re-planned according to distance lessons and the need to maintain interaction between all students, with and without BLP. The fact that the pandemic divided the class – students with BLP remained in school and students without BLP followed the project from home – required increased attention from teachers on each student's access to digital learning and also on strategies to ensure that the activities continued to be participated in by all. This involved a reorganisation of the activities and the dimension of evaluation, with the collaboration of the UP team. The circumstances of the covid-19 pandemic forced us to meet more often, we thought more together, and there was more discussion and production of knowledge at the level of the strategies found.

CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude that, although the inclusion ambition of eSGarden for which concerns the special educational needs dimension might have been limited by the diversity of profiles of students participating in the project, this closely relates with the differentiated national inclusive education policies and the ways they enable or not effective and full inclusion of all students in mainstream schools. The school in Portugal was the only partner school that included students with more severe barriers to learning and participation because the Portuguese educational policy seems to be the more upfront one nationally supporting schools to actually integrate these students in the mainstream schools with clear sets of measures and resources. That is also part of the reason why the school integrated the project with a clear focus on this inclusion cases and brought its years of experience knowledge to the project with its teachers being active organizers of a staff training event.

This is also a part of the reason why the project followed the case of students with severe BLP from AVEP more closely. We must acknowledge that the project limited lifespan and pandemic induced restrictions did not enable teachers and evaluators to identify significant improvements on the participant students, since this improvements often take a lot of time and consistent efforts. Still, it is important to highlight how improvements on social contacts with other students and adults, often difficult for certain students with specific severe disabilities, were noted and related with some of the projects' learning activities. Moreover, a better awareness of all students not only of their colleagues with BLP limitations, but also of their potential, was also an important achievement of all the school activities. After all, inclusion is not only about making everyone achieving their full potential, but also about valuing diversity.

In the case of AVEP, we must also highlight how, due to positive impacts of the eSGarden project regarding the opportunities created to increase cohesion and social inclusion, the school board decided to continue the project, which from the 2021/2022 school year, took the name Gardens and Kitchen Gardens and constituted the students' curriculum through the legal framework DI 54/2018 and DL 55/2018 (curriculum autonomy and flexibility project). This is an evidence of how small steps through projects as this can pave the way to wider changes towards educational innovation and improvement in schools.

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CONSULTED LEGISLATION

▪ Portugal

Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018. Diário da República n.º 129/2018, Série I de 2018-07-06

Decreto-Lei n.º 55/2018. Diário da República n.º 129/2018, Série I de 2018-07-06

▪ Greece

Law Nº. 3699 of 2008, 2nd October

▪ Slovenia

Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 88/13

Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 58/11, 40/12 - ZUJF, 90/12, 41/17 - ZOPOPP and 200/20 – ZOOMTVI

▪ Autonomous Community of Valencia (Spain)

Decree-law 104/2018, 27 July