



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
about the various understandings of
inclusive school communities



Webbased toolkit

Developing Inclusive School Communities

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

about the various understandings of inclusive school communities¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusiveness is quite complex and covers a broad range of different aspects of diversity. Teachers, principals and parents need a more comprehensive perspective on inclusiveness in order to prevent school communities from stumbling from one incident to another. We agree with the perspective that inclusive education involves valuing and facilitating the full participation and belonging of everyone in all aspects of the education communities and systems (Cologon, 2019). This conceptual framework focuses on mapping several indicators of inclusiveness. These indicators, as we will see in next parts refer to questions such as:

- what are the characteristics of inclusive school communities, how can this be recognized at different levels (e.g. classroom level, school level, parents and local partners level) and different actors (students, teachers, parents, school heads, actors outside schools)
- what does this require from all of the actors involved?

The aim of the first part of the conceptual framework is to outline and discuss the various ways of defining inclusiveness as a key aspect of school community cultures. It translates academic insights into concepts, which are more suitable in a practical context for teachers and principals, school boards, school board associations, regional or national bodies like student unions. We structured the framework around the factors mentioned above.

This conceptual framework combines academic insights and practice-based expertise in one conceptual framework.

Moreover, the concept of inclusive school communities makes diversity a normal aspect of everyday school life. In order to define the concept of inclusive school community we will build on the work of Bortini et al. (2018) who discerned five aspects of inclusive school leadership that are pillars of inclusive school communities.

However, we decided to focus on the first four because it goes hand in hand with our project aim of reflecting upon educational practitioners/ teachers' practices/level of readiness regarding inclusive education while inviting them to co-create/develop new indicators that foster the development of a more inclusive school community. Not at least, our goal is to invite practitioners to use the toolbox developed within the projectⁱ in their own school so that we could have a stronger and more concrete impact at a school-community level.

Therefore, the project view on inclusive school communities focuses on four main pillars as presented below.



Figure 1 Inclusive School Communities Pillars

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Inclusion – conceptual delimitations*

Ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all has always been etched on the United Nations agenda while developing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) regarding education. Regarding the development of inclusive education systems, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) intended, among other things, to ensure that by 2030 gender disparities in education are eliminated and that equal access to all levels of education and vocational training is ensured for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities (SDG goal 4).

At its core the United Nations take the matter of inclusivity and equity as the main key to develop a highly qualitative education system by promoting life-long learning opportunities for all.

The Inclusive Education Movement aims to rethink school education through significant changes in school culture, structure, practice and logic (Ainscow 1995; Carrington 1999; Slee 1995; Thomas and Loxley 2001). Although there is extensive research emphasizing the importance of school culture to include students with disabilities (Carrington and Elkins, 2005), and on how the differences themselves drive the development of new cultural practices in schools, there are relatively few things to look for in how good practices can be improved. It is important for the staff to use the knowledge base that exists within the school to develop a holistic, creative and consistent response to problems that they feel cannot be solved. We support student access to educational opportunities by developing both student and staff skills. Such an approach represents a key conceptual change in how schools understand the population of students. As Harwood (2010) argues, attention to cultural factors is an important factor in better understanding of the differences. Essentially, these approaches represent a significant shift from the "inclusion" labelling paradigm (Graham and Slee, 2008) to the practice of school initiatives supported by the acceptance of diversity.

In order to have a more structured view we will take in consideration in our framework the approach of Boyle & Topping (2012) that focus on four levels in describing concepts of inclusion:

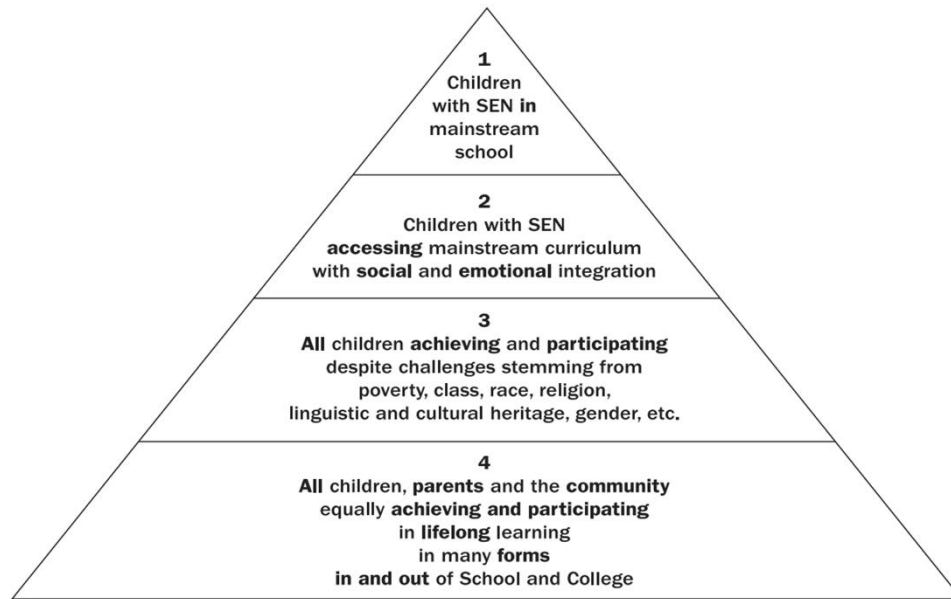


Figure 2: Expanding the concepts of inclusion (Boyle & Topping, 2012)

The definition of inclusion has widened, and is now taken to mean at least all children achieving and participating despite challenges stemming from disability, poverty, social class, race, religion, linguistic and cultural heritage, gender, and so on. However, the definition is still up for development as the school community has to be ready to face new and challenging social situations.

2.2 Inclusive school communities

In a community, there are not only shared tasks, but there are also common goods. When teachers and students are engaged together in an educational community, they see themselves as members of a collective in pursuit of educational goods that they seek to achieve together. These shared goods define the nature of a good education for members of the community. They are the source of moral coherence. They may help form the identity of members of the community. They form the basis of inclusion (and exclusion) from the group. Hence, educational communities are more like congregations than they are like stores or banks. They are places where people unite in common projects (Strike, 1999).

A school community values and respects all its members and provides a safe learning and working environment for everyone to express their opinions, raise awareness and develop their

skills. In particular, this result relies on leaders to enable teachers to engage in and adapt to constructive and critical learning (Marin, 2014). The School communities that value and respect members and provide a safe learning and working environment for everyone to express their opinions, raise awareness and develop their skills together are more likely to be inclusive. Carrington & Robinson (2006) suggest four guiding principles to support the development of a more inclusive school community:

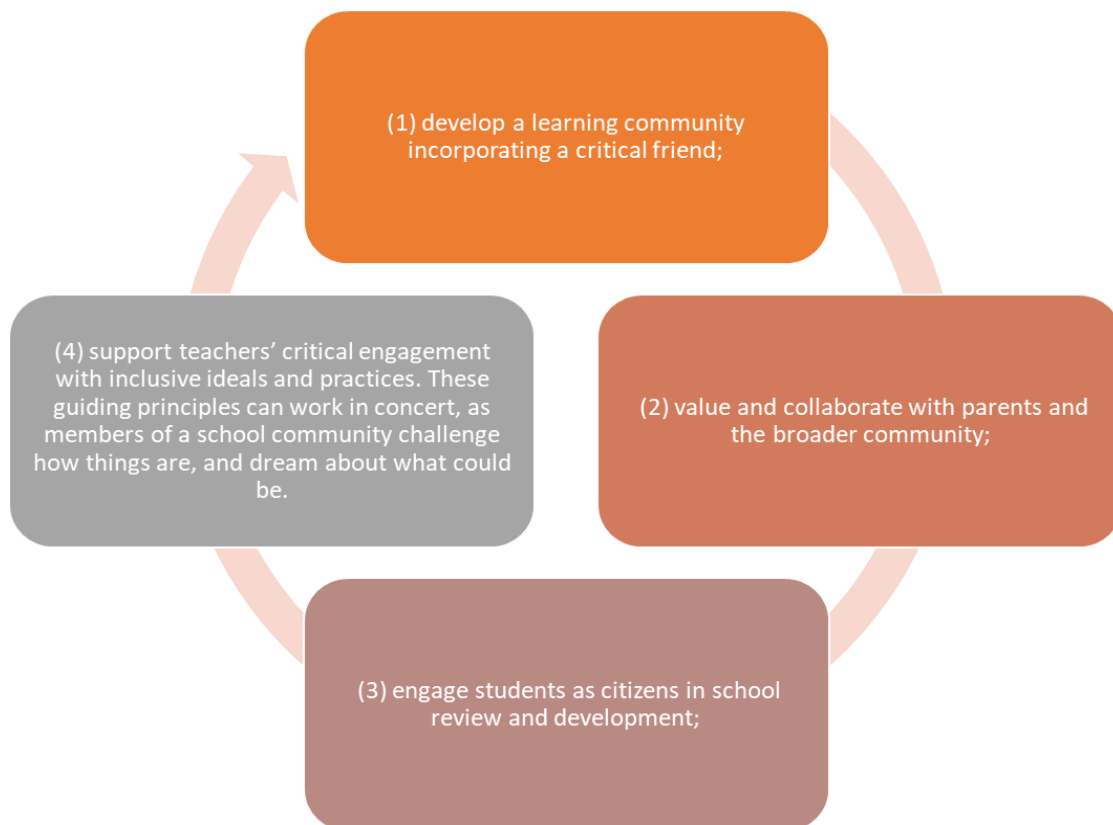


Figure 3 Carrington & Robinson` four guiding principles to support the development of a more inclusive school community

A **critical friend outside of school** can provide focus, guidance and encourage processes that uncover the deeper aspects of thinking needed for reform. The role of this 'outsider' is to facilitate, observe and challenge interactions between stakeholders (Robinson & Carrington, 2002).

Also, Ainscow (2001) considered **parent contribution** as a way of mobilizing under-used resources and suggested that an inclusive school community could build positive partnerships in education that move beyond token parental involvement.

Engaging students as citizens in school review and development is an idea from Freiberg (1996) and it aims at emphasizing the establishment of collaboration and teamwork in a culture where students are treated as citizens and not as tourists. Students are encouraged to contribute in a meaningful way to a school community, so cooperation, participation and support are key factors. Students can be more valued and respected as citizens in a school community.

Not least, the fourth key is to **support teachers' critical engagement** with inclusive ideals and practices. The central idea focuses on how an inclusive school community must encourage teachers to question, challenge and move beyond assumptions and practices of the existing order. Strongly promoted is the idea that it is urgent for the teacher profession to be seen as a key element for promoting high quality education, capable of adapting itself to the exigency of the era we live in.

These four guiding principles can work together when members of the school community are wondering what things are going on and dreaming of what they can do.

Furthermore, Booth and Ainscow (2002) developed the *Index for inclusion, developing learning and participation in schools*. The purpose of this index is to offer schools a supportive process of self-review and development, which draws on the views of staff, governors, students and parents/carers, as well as other members of the surrounding communities. It involves a detailed examination of how barriers to learning and participation can be reduced for any student. There are three dimensions and sections in the Index:

DIMENSION A Creating inclusive cultures

This dimension creates a secure, accepting, collaborating, stimulating community, in which everyone is valued as the foundation for the highest achievements of all. It develops shared inclusive values that are conveyed to all new staff, students, governors and parents/carers. The principles and values in inclusive school cultures, guide decisions about policies and moment to moment practice in classrooms, so that school development becomes a continuous process.

DIMENSION B Producing inclusive policies

This dimension makes sure that inclusion permeates all school plans. Policies encourage the participation of students and staff from the moment they join the school, reach out to all students in the locality and minimize exclusionary pressures. All policies involve clear strategies for change. Support is considered to be all activities which increase the capacity of a school to respond to diversity of students, staff and parents. All forms of support are developed according to inclusive principles and are brought together within a single framework.

DIMENSION C Evolving inclusive practices

This dimension develops school practices which reflect the inclusive cultures and policies of the school. Lessons are made responsive to student diversity. Students are encouraged to be actively involved in all aspects of their education, which draws on their knowledge and experience outside school.

While Ainscow and Booth (2007) agree that all three dimensions are all necessary to the development of inclusion, ‘creating inclusive cultures’ is the most important one. Too little attention has been given in the past to the potential of cultures in supporting or undermining developments. Yet these cultures are at the heart of improvement. The development of shared inclusive values and collaborative relationships may lead to changes in the other dimensions. It is through inclusive cultures that changes in policies and practices can be sustained when new practitioners, children and young people join a setting.

To make this more concrete, we illustrate this with the part of the Index that focuses on *Creating inclusive cultures (Dimension A)*:

A.1 | Building community

INDICATOR A.1.1 | Everyone is made to feel welcome.

A.1.2 | Students help each other.

A.1.3 | Staff collaborate with each other.

A.1.4 | Staff and students treat one another with respect.

A.1.5 | There is a partnership between staff and parents/carers.

A.1.6 | Staff and governors work well together.

A.1.7 | All local communities are involved in the school.

A.2 | Establishing inclusive values

INDICATOR A.2.1 | *There are high expectations for all students.*

A.2.2 | *Staff, governors, students and parents/carers share a philosophy of inclusion.*

A.2.3 | *Students are equally valued.*

A.2.4 | *Staff and students treat one another as human beings as well as occupants of a 'role'.*

A.2.5 | *Staff seek to remove barriers to learning and participation in all aspects of the school.*

A.2.6 | *The school strives to minimize all forms of discrimination.*

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – TOOL FOR SCHOOLS

Building on the analysis presented in the previous chapters, the following conceptual framework highlights the importance of understanding inclusion and inclusiveness as concepts that extend beyond special educational needs. Inclusion, in this context, encompasses all members of the school community—students, educators, staff, and families—working together to foster a culture of inclusivity. This framework emphasizes that creating inclusive cultures is not solely about accommodating children with special educational needs, but about developing an environment where diversity in all its forms is valued and supported.

Furthermore, to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities within inclusive school communities, it is essential to focus on multiple levels. These levels—ranging from the individual to the institutional—allow for a comprehensive examination of the various factors that contribute to inclusiveness. By considering these different layers, we can better analyse how inclusive practices are implemented and how they impact the school environment as a whole. Each level provides insights into the roles, interactions, and dynamics that shape the experience of inclusion,

helping educators and school leaders create more effective and sustainable inclusive policies and practices.

This framework components:

- Three levels (Classroom level, School level and Parents and local partners level)
- Three aspects/indicators to be analysed for each level: recognize, implement, barriers
- Support questions for each indicator/aspect

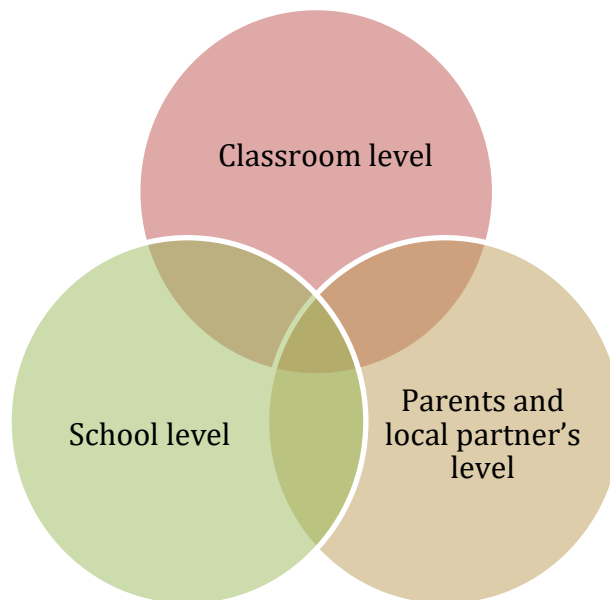
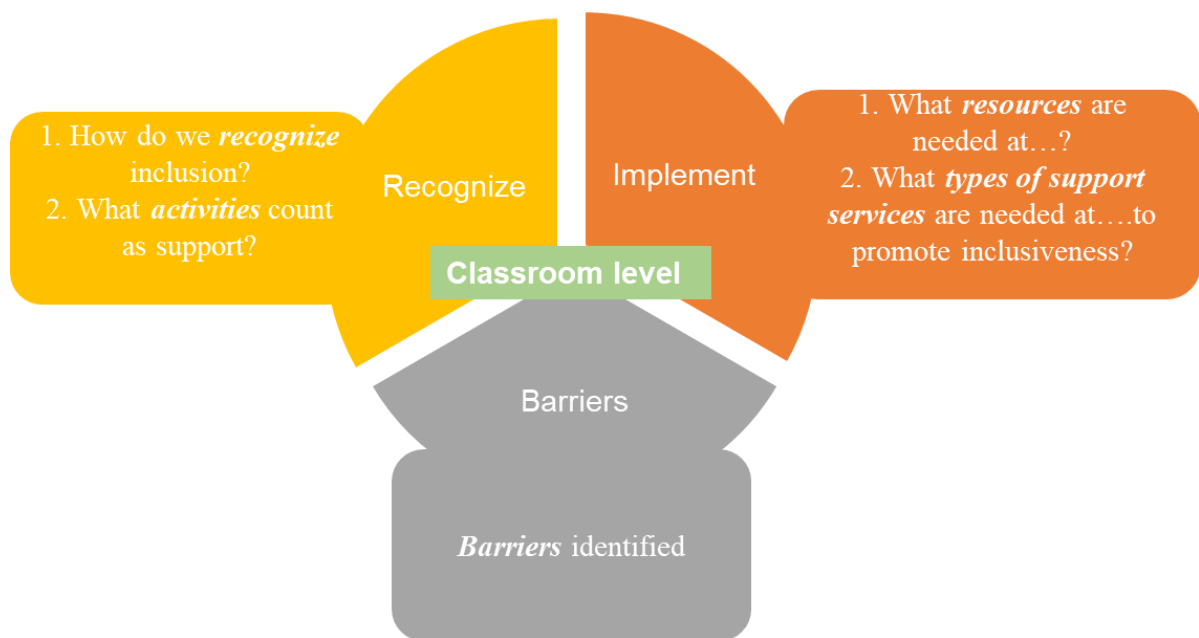


Figure 4 Framework Components

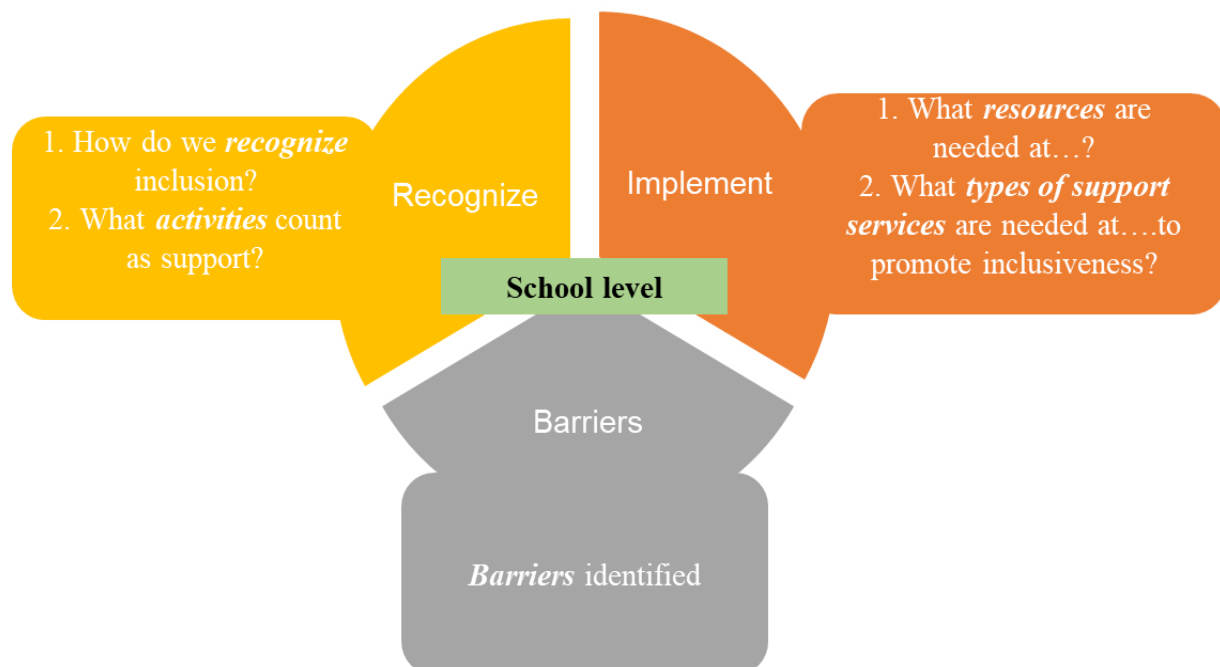
1. Classroom level

Classroom level refers to the extent in which each pupil and student feels part of an inclusive classroom community. The purpose of analysing this level is to better see how all children have a voice and are involved in everyday school life and decision making



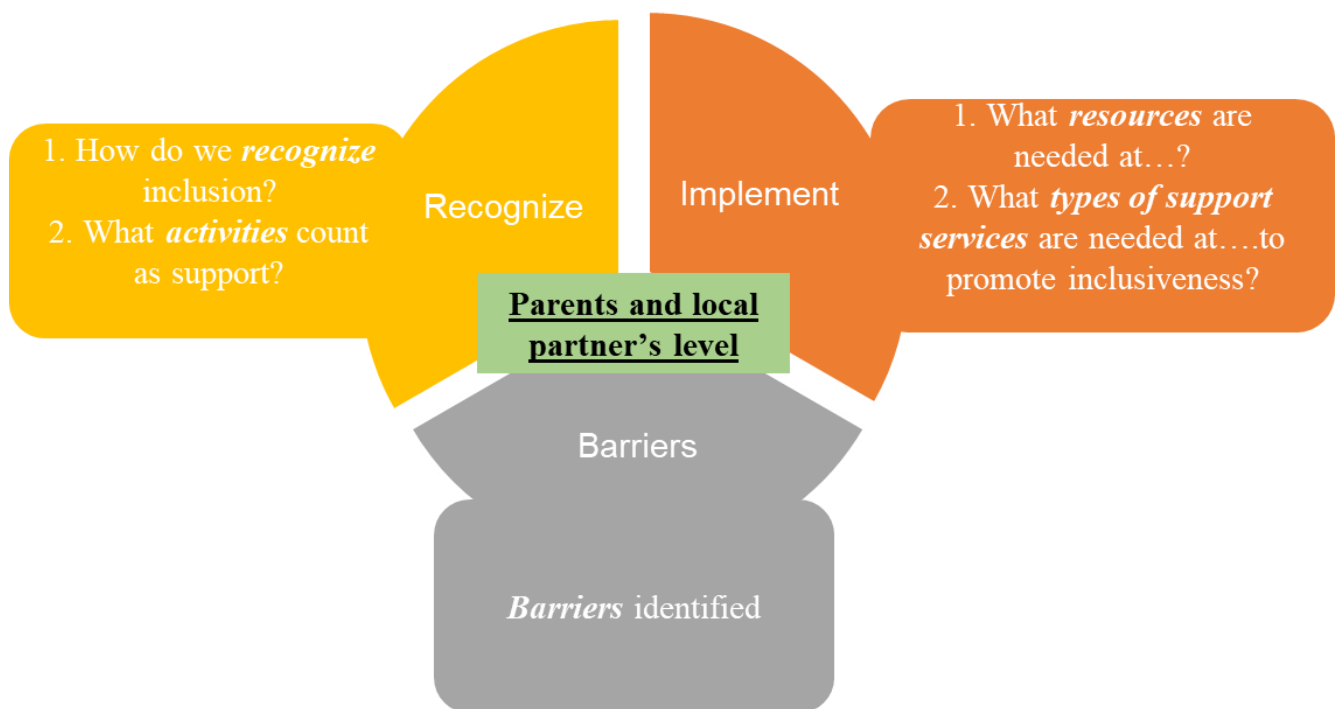
2. School level

School level refers to the extent in which each school staff member (teacher, school leader or other staff member) feels part of an inclusive school community. This level has the purpose to analyse actions, practices and ways in which all staff members are involved in everyday school life and decision making, regardless of their formal status.



3. Parents and local partner's level

Parents and local partners level refers to the extent in which parents or guardians, policy makers and other local or regional stakeholders/NGOs feel part of the wider school community. This level has the purpose to analyse ways in which they are involved not only in disseminating information, but in everyday school life and decision making.



Indicator		L1: Classroom level	L2: School level	L3: Parents and local partners level
Recognize	How do we <i>recognize</i> inclusion at...?			
	What <i>activities</i> count as support at...?			
Implement	What <i>resources</i> can be mobilised to support learning and participation at...?			
	What <i>types of support services</i> are needed at....to promote inclusiveness?			
Barriers	<i>Barriers</i> identified at...?			
Others	Other aspects you consider important in order to better understand the inclusiveness of school communities:			

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ⁱ This document is part of the ERASMUS+ project Co-creating Inclusive School Communities (2021-1-LI01-KA220-SCH-000027667). This project has resulted in a toolbox to support schools to strengthen inclusive school communities at classroom level, school level and at the local level. The toolbox can be found at <http://www.developinginclusiveschoolcommunities.org>.