THE ECO-IN MANIFESTO ON SCHOOL INCLUSION
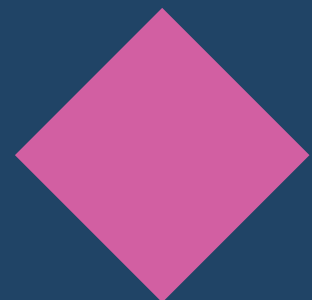
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INTRODUCTION

The Algorithm for New Ecological Approaches to Inclusion (ECO-IN) project[1] was launched in 2019, under the Erasmus + programme with the aim of developing new assessment system and training activities, able to generate inclusive schools starting from an "ecological" approach. In order to achieve this, the project consortium, comprising the University of Perugia, FORMA.Azione, the Lithuanian Education Trade Union, University of Urbino, MIRADA LOCAL, the School Inspectorate of Alba County (Romania) and SOLIDAR Foundation, ran in-depth research on school inclusion in primary and secondary education in Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain.

Based on the needs identified across these EU member states, and following further research at the EU level, the project delivers an innovative and digitalized assessment protocol for assessing and monitoring successful inclusion practices, policy recommendations to boost inclusion, and training to prepare all education stakeholders (teachers, school heads, policymakers, educators, external experts, parents, families) to actively participate in the school system following an "ecological approach".

The ECO-IN project refers to the ecological model proposed by Mitchell (2016) that considers the education system as a spiral: each "circle'' is crucial for the development of each person. On the basis of this ecological model, each of the different systems is involved and responsible for the success/failure of an inclusive educational (and social) system. This model is the theoretical basis that ECO-IN project partners chose to refer to, to ascertain the extent to which the different players involved (in the different systems) enable it for a better whole school inclusion. The ecological approach of the ECO-IN project is concerned with assessing and providing evidence on the state of inclusive education, and collecting data from a wide range of stakeholders to be used by policymakers in order to steer actions.

The following Manifesto is based on the ECO-IN project results and reports from FORMA.Azione, the Lithuanian Education Trade Union, MIRADA LOCAL, the School Inspectorate of Alba County (Romania), SOLIDAR Foundation, University of Perugia and the University of Urbino, as well as the contributions to the ECO-IN High Level Conference on Policy Recommendations for School Inclusion of representatives of the following organizations: EESC Workers Group, ETUCE, European Commission (DG EAC), LLLP, OBESSU and S&D Group.

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1   *ECO-IN project website*

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EUROPE

The European Union has established several policies and initiatives to support inclusive education across member states. One of these is the UNESCO 1994 Salamanca Declaration, which anchors many EU documents. The Declaration's Framework of Action aims to ensure that pupils can attend their neighbourhood schools regardless of their needs. Currently, EU institutions guide themselves after the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching and the more recently adopted 2022 Council Recommendation on 'Pathways to School Success'. The latter recommendation contains an inclusive approach to school success, which does not limit itself to academic results but emphasises the importance of learner's wellbeing and elements such as personal, social and emotional development. Furthermore, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) stands at the basis of the EU's action for a more inclusive European society. Its first principle states that ''Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market'', laying the foundation for Inclusive Education.[1]

A relevant paradigm behind Inclusive Education in Europe is the '**whole-school approach**'. In the past, the EU has approached the topic of whole-school education but from the perspective of preventing early school leaving.[2]

This provides a clear understanding of what the EU institutions believe this approach is, focusing on: **promoting a positive school culture, teamwork and collaborative practices within the school community**. The whole-school approach to mental health and well-being calls for the adoption of "a bottom-up, participatory and flexible approach that fits with the ecology of the school and the local community".[3] The whole school approach is in line with the ecological approach as applied in the ECO-IN project as it hopes to bring all school actors and stakeholders (school staff, students, parents and the local community) together to ensure educational success.

However, usually most of the conversation focuses on teachers, parents, school heads and learners, and does not consider other types of educational support staff members, CSOs and volunteering organisations. This focus of the EU on more institutional actor, is explained by the EU's lack of competence over national policies.

Despite these efforts, discrepancies remain between the EU policies and the real school context in the sense of policy making at EU level being detached from what happens in daily life across Europe. According to the periodic UNESCO reports, **all countries are sliding backwards on the topic of inclusive education,** including the Nordic countries which usually are hailed for their education system. With the **decrease in public funding for education across Europe**,[4] it is no doubt that it is becoming more and more difficult for

1   *European Pillar of Social Rights*, European Commission, 2017.
2   *Such as in the European Commission's Education and Training 2020 Strategy*
3   *Cefai, C., Simões, C. and Caravita, S. (2021) 'A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU' NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p.95. doi: 10.2766/50546.*
4   *Frank, Andrei (2021). The Commodification of Education and the Prevalence of For-Profit Education Stakeholders. Elisa Gambardella (ed.). SOLIDAR Foundation.*

the education systems to implement what academia is observing as effective inclusive education. Moreover, **the teacher workforce is aging rapidly in the EU**, putting more pressure on the education system given that fewer and fewer people want to enter a system in which they do not feel valued. Concerning the support needed by teachers, SOLIDAR Foundation's Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019 points out that the shared responsibility is not a reality across Europe given how the workload of teaching professionals has been increasing, affecting work-life balance and without this being reflected in the teachers' remuneration. [5] Furthermore, there is a **lack of support regarding initial and continuing training** for teaching in a multicultural environment and for using digital tools in teaching. [6]

Another challenge for Inclusive Education in Europe is that **there does not seem to be a singular definition** for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The EU institutions operate with a catch-all, though narrow, understanding of children with SEN, referring to children whose learning difficulties hinder their ability to benefit from the general education system without support or accommodation to their needs.[7] Not having a common definition is not only a matter of terminology, but it leads to different perceptions of what kind of special needs are education contexts are referring to and consequently, what kind of skills, settings and learning environments should be available for better meeting these needs and ensuring the respect of inclusivity as set at the EU policy level.[8]
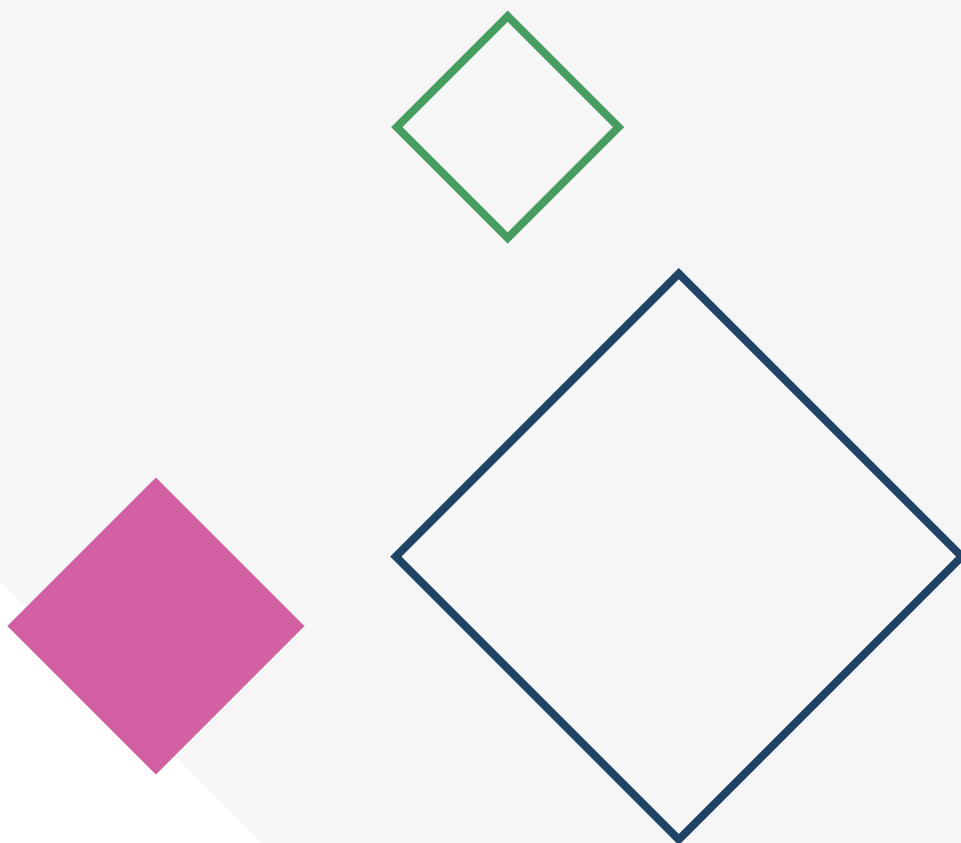
5   Frank, Andrei (2019). *Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2019.* Lucie Susova and Elisa Gambardella (eds.). SOLIDAR Foundation.

6   ECO-IN Project Partners (2021). *Repertoire on School Inclusion Programme.*

7   European Commission (2018). *Access to quality education for children with special educational needs.*

8   Ibid.

THE ECO-IN PROJECT

The ECO-IN project aims to address the lack of a holistic and systemic approach to combat social and educational exclusion of students that lead to fragmentary interventions, mainly based on 'emergency responses' put in place by some of the educational players that do not keep in mind the whole picture of the needs, measures, competences and skills available. **The project addresses this challenge by proposing a new and innovative "ecological model" to generate inclusive schools and communities.**

At the centre of the project lies the ecological approach to inclusive education. This perspective challenges traditional definitions and categorizations by **promoting a vision of inclusive education that addresses the diverse needs of students at all levels, in any setting or phase of life**. It introduces an innovative approach that recognizes the crucial role of **collaboration and interconnections between different systems**, emphasizing the necessity of training, engagement, and cooperation among all stakeholders involved in the educational process, such as teachers, school heads, families, educators, collaborators, policymakers and specialists.

Through an ecological approach and based on scientific evidence, ECO-IN promotes an active participation of teachers, school heads, policymakers, parents and families. It aspires to improve inclusive education policies and practices from primary to lower secondary school, through the active involvement of all the main educational stakeholders – such as, teachers, school heads, educational staff (in and out of the school), parents and public authorities – by providing them with specific training and supporting actions to concretely act as a teamwork combating segregation and radicalisation thus enabling more qualitative and quantitative measures to implement, monitor, and assess inclusiveness at school.

The ECO-IN training actions were inspired by **specific values**, such as

1. **PROSOCIALITY:** Prosociality includes all positive conducts towards other people, which, without producing material benefits (like money), generate reciprocity. Improving prosocial actions in schools increase better interpersonal relationships avoiding conflicts and generating positive reciprocity. Moreover, the promotion of prosocial communications in schools leads to appreciation for diversity and empathy. Hence the positive results for the community in which the school operates.

2. **PARTICIPATION:** understood as the **meeting** between diverse actors, their **involvement** in joint projects, as well as the **dialogue** between multiple institutional levels, professions, and approaches. Ultimately, the coming together of different perspectives **priorities and needs**, thus **active collaboration** to achieve common objectives.

3. **COMMITMENT/RESPONSIBILITY**: understood as the value-driven use of one's own strengths in carrying out an individual or collective task, minding their dissemination. Responsibility understood as the consistent behaviour that follows up on a commitment. It implies accepting the consequences of one's choices to carry forward, disseminate and advocate for the value of diversity and inclusion in school and society.

4. **QUALITY**: The relationship between the quality of inclusion and the quality of the school. Such quality shouldn't be affirmed through values only, but also measured and assessed.

5. **TRUSTINESS (Trust and trustworthiness):**
    The act of relying on someone/something (people or institutions/organisations) that generates feelings of security and allows someone to trust that they can act in our best interests; an unconditional belief as prerequisition for acting prosocially.

Based on these principles, the project tests, monitors and assesses the impact of ecological and innovative training targeting the different stakeholders engaged in inclusion (school heads, teachers, parents, experts inside and outside school, policymakers) on the quality of inclusive procedures and related assessment practices, for improving education systems and achieving equal opportunities for all.

In order to facilitate data collection and analysis, the project works with the ECO-IN Assessment Protocol (AP). Thanks to this tool, statistical and self-assessment data were analysed and resulted in an evidence-based data collection about the quality of inclusive practices and policies implemented by the schools. The AP should be used by schools as a **self–assessment tool which provides them with a "map of possible interventions", provide schools with data that helps them improve inclusive processes. The AP is based on an algorithm that can combine common, country-specific and context-specific variables coherent with the relevant EU priorities and recommendations and which is validated by extensive, participatory and evidence-based assessed experimentation**. The AP created in the frame of the ECO-IN project therefore can pave the way for tailored recommendations on measures to be adopted by specific contexts, based on evidence of data and impact across Europe. Potentially, it can create strong evidence that drives and inspires new knowledge in school inclusion and be the starting point for new research on the field and policy reforms with potentially **high systemic impact and change in EU member states**.
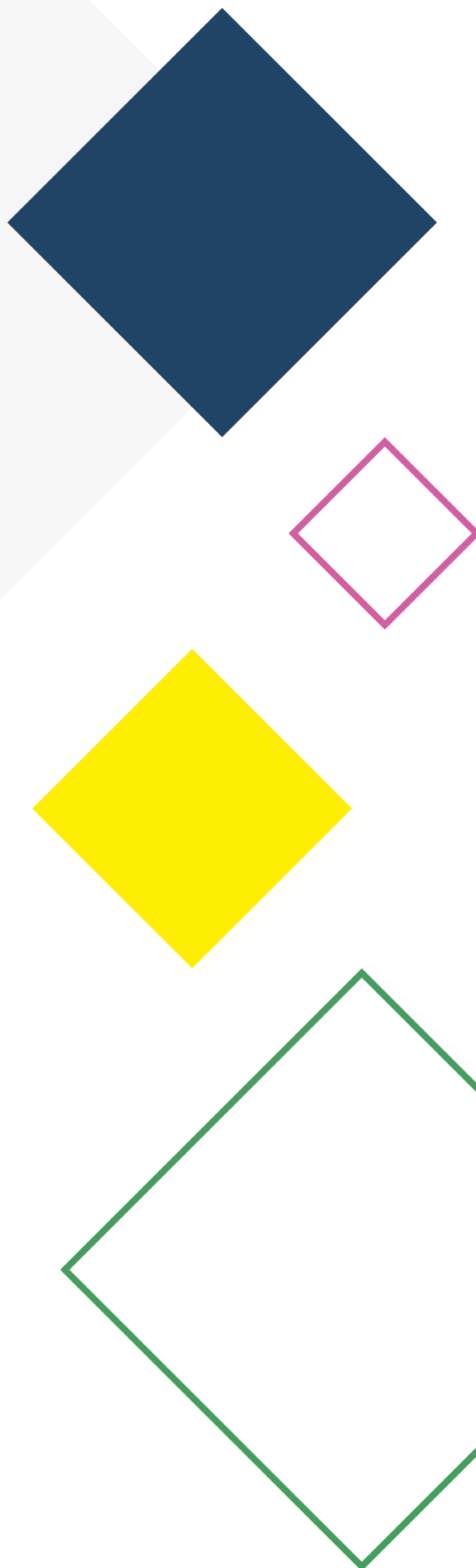
PROJECT INSIGHTS

Discrepancies between Inclusive Education Policy and Reality

By means of the [Repertoire on School Inclusion Programme](#) which was developed in the framework of the project, several discrepancies between policy and legislation on Inclusive Education and the reality in partner countries were pointed out. This Manifesto aims at taking stock of the identified gaps to highlight potential areas for intervention at the national as well as European level, as highlighted in the Policy Recommendations of the Project.

In the case of **Lithuania**, partners describe a lack of political will to implement Inclusive Education and formalise it at the level of Lithuanian law. Despite the increasing number of students with special educational needs, no concrete measures are taken to adapt educational institutions and their offer. The Lithuanian case therefore calls for creating appropriate educational environments, to ensure the readiness of the staff of all educational institutions to work with children with special educational needs. The results of the project in **Romania**, instead, show a negative attitude towards the term SEN, based also on a competitive understanding of education and its aims. Indeed, partners in Romania described the attitude towards children with special educational needs as one of rejection and stigmatisation, on the grounds that they would affect the general class' performance. Moreover, everyday teachers face numerous obstacles, such as limited intervention from itinerant teachers, the lack of a material base and instruments that support achieving inclusive education, and lack of communication and support between the members of the intervention team.

Discrepancies were observed also in the case of **Italy,** often considered to be a leading country in the area of inclusive education [9] . One example is offered by the access to high schools for students with disabilities. The lack of modernization of the high school system, which is still influenced by an outdated old model, results in hindered access to high school for students with disabilities, who are often pushed toward Vocational Education and Training secondary schools. While VET schools can be a great driver for inclusion, they shouldn't be the only accessible option for students with SEN. **Spain** is also regarded as one of the EU countries better promoting and implementing inclusive education system, yet it has been argued that current policies reflect a more integrative approach rather than an inclusive one.[10]

Besides country-specific challenges, the project research identified also some common threads throughout all the school ecosystems participating. In the following paragraphs some examples will be given that illustrate the challenges some of the key figures of the ecological approach to school inclusion face. However, these examples are not exhaustive and each professional which contributes to the fostering of school inclusion faces specific challenges. Among these, is the undervalued and misunderstood role of school psychologists. This role becomes increasingly important in schools as a collaborative figure for planning the steps of the inclusion process, both inside and outside the school, as they fulfil a crucial role on the social and emotional outcomes for all students.[11] Despite the increasing importance of the role of psychologists to foster inclusive education, their role seems to be less clear compared to the ones of teachers,

9   Ianes, D., Demo, H. & Dell'Anna, S. (2020). *Inclusive education in Italy: Historical steps, positive developments, and challenges. Prospects 49, 249–263.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09509-7
10 *ECO-IN Project Partners (2021).* [Repertoire on School Inclusion Programme](#).
11 *Ibid.*

for example, given that they do not seem to be as represented within the EU level. This issue needs to be tackled with a set of actions that addresses policymakers, school leaders, teachers, families and educational practitioners.

Another identified challenge is ''the 21st century classroom'. This century's increasing use of digital technologies has introduced "new digital and blended learning environments[12]", and thus the use of digital tools integrated in teaching methods.[13] This entails that "a wealth of new opportunities for learning are available", such as MOOCs and online tutoring.[14] However, these new developments also bring on challenges for teachers, as illustrated by cases in the ECO-IN partner countries, as in various cases is teachers lack proper skills and competences to be prepared for this century's classroom.

Last but not least, inclusion in schools is undermined by the lack of funding for education in general and for making education more inclusive in particular. This emerges clearly also in terms of policy coherence, as the project could identify discrepancies between policy and/or legislation and practice in schools. Cuts to the budget allocated to the education public sector have been applied in all partner countries, resulting in less resources dedicated to inclusive measures towards students with SEN. Less resources mean less investment in specialised personnel that can support teachers to bring inclusion to their classrooms, as well as more workload on the teachers – often left alone to deal with it. Strategies and methodologies cannot overlook the question of funding when developing any kind of provision, recommendation, practice etc. for the promotion and implementation of Inclusive Education.

The Importance of Trainings on Inclusive Education

The ECO-IN project also organised international and local trainings in four partner countries (Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Spain). These training activities aimed at promoting a value-driven ecological approach in the (50 number of) schools involved in the project as described in paragraph 3, to improve the quality of these schools' inclusiveness.

Moreover, the **trainings provided a chance to collect valuable information on what kind of challenges educational stakeholders face in each country**. For example, in the case of **Lithuania**, the training testified to insufficient teachers' skills, insufficient funding for inclusive education, lack of human resources (teachers), unfavourable public opinion towards inclusive education, and hostility from parents were some challenges inclusive education faces. To solve these challenges, the following proposals were identified: the creation of sensory rooms and specially equipped environments to promote inclusiveness, and the professional development, upgrading of skills and qualifications of both teachers and auxiliary staff. In the case of **Spain** instead, participants expressed that the training has helped to train their perspective to improve the levels of inclusion within their organisation and community.

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12 *The Glossary of Educational Reform describes 'learning environments' as follows: "Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn. Since students may learn in a wide variety of settings, such as outside-of-school locations and outdoor environments, the term is often used as a more accurate or preferred alternative to classroom, which has more limited and traditional connotations—a room with rows of desks and a chalkboard, for example." Ed Glossary, "learning environment"*
13 *Xhomaqi, Brikena (chief ed.) (2019). 21st Century Learning Environments: Position Paper. Andrew Todd (ed.) & Pauline Boivin and Juanma Báez Ramírez (co-eds.). Lifelong Learning Platform.*
14 *Ibid.:p.12.*

The added value of the ECO-IN assessment protocol

One of the main objectives of the ECO-IN project was the developing and validating a European assessment tool for measuring the quality of school inclusion, called the "Ecological Assessment Scale for Inclusion" (EASI). The EASI scale managed through the algorithm, underwent an initial validation and reliability control check. It was then administered to the different categories (school heads, educators, experts, families, teachers, policymakers, and secondary school students) in the different partner countries. The questionnaire had a common part (20 items) to be answered by all the categories involved and a category specific part. The required assessment concerned the presence of each parameter in the school according to the perception of the specific category and how such a parameter was deemed relevant (salience). These two evaluations, modifiable as weights acting on the algorithm, would then merge into a final, total score. The data analysis carried out with the EASI scale showed interesting developments across Partner Countries after the implementation of local training activities.

For instance, the data show that schools in **Italy** that during the first measurement of the EASI scale showed a high quality of inclusion were also the most prone to innovative approaches to further their inclusiveness. This included the creation of ecological working teams to improve inclusion, organising local and open fora in their area, creating databases to collect, categorise and map all the bodies, entities and institutions working on inclusion on a social, policy and community level to start creating a wider network of stakeholders. This was complemented with other actions such as conducting questionnaires to collect data on perceptions of inclusion targeting parents, policy makers, educators, experts, teachers from other schools and promoting awareness in their area. Schools that, on the other hand, showed a low quality of inclusion, seemed to

put higher priority on more traditional and sets of actions that didn't involve assessments, such as raising awareness in their area and improving the communication between the schools and the institutions in their area. The data analysis shows the high impact of local training appear to be all widely significant with higher scores for the experimental group; this highlights the extreme efficacy of the local training on the variables deemed as relevant for inclusion.

For example, in **Spain** after the intervention, the differences that were present in the first measurement in all conditions have disappeared. Taken into account that groups were not homogeneous, this could be considered a satisfying result. Local training led to equalization of a situation in which some schools had a better disposition compared to others, and we can see how the highest scores in all variables were registered by experimental schools. In **Romania,** compared to the pilot phase, results from experimental schools are significantly higher for three variables: meetings on inclusion, training on inclusion, feeling actively involved in the inclusion process. The increase in score in these variables shows that after the training the participants gained a better insight of what quality, ecological and inclusive education needs and entails. It is significant that these three aspects increased, as the situation previous to the intervention showed that inclusion was seen more as something that was more a "technical" and "medical" matter. Giving high score to such aspects, shows that the participants to the training understood that for inclusion to work, it needs bigger community efforts.
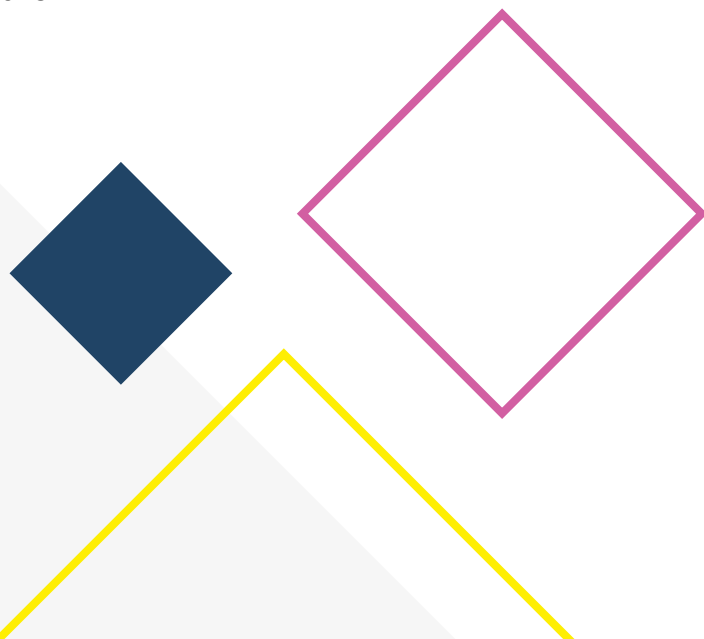
DECLARATION OF INTENTION

This Manifesto aims to identify and indicate, at the European level, values, principles but above all actions and work tools on which to build and consolidate over time participatory alliances between different stakeholders to promote school inclusion according to an "ecological" approach. Most European school systems develop forms of cooperation with local authorities, families, associations, groups of experts, etc., which can often have different expectations and demands. The school system is committed to being a point of connection, dialogue, encounter and synthesis for all these differences.

The school becomes, therefore, a Center of Prosocial Trust (EPTC, European Prosocial Trust Center). The EPTC brings together not only educational professionals, but also different actors and different points of view in with the aim of encountering one another and holding a dialogue in a welcoming and inclusive environment.

The ECO-IN project partners will keep working on engaging their local and national policymakers in relation to the fostering of Inclusive Education. Moreover, ECO-IN partners and the actors they cooperated with throughout the project will work on spreading the concept of ecological inclusion to those realities that are still struggling to achieve inclusion.
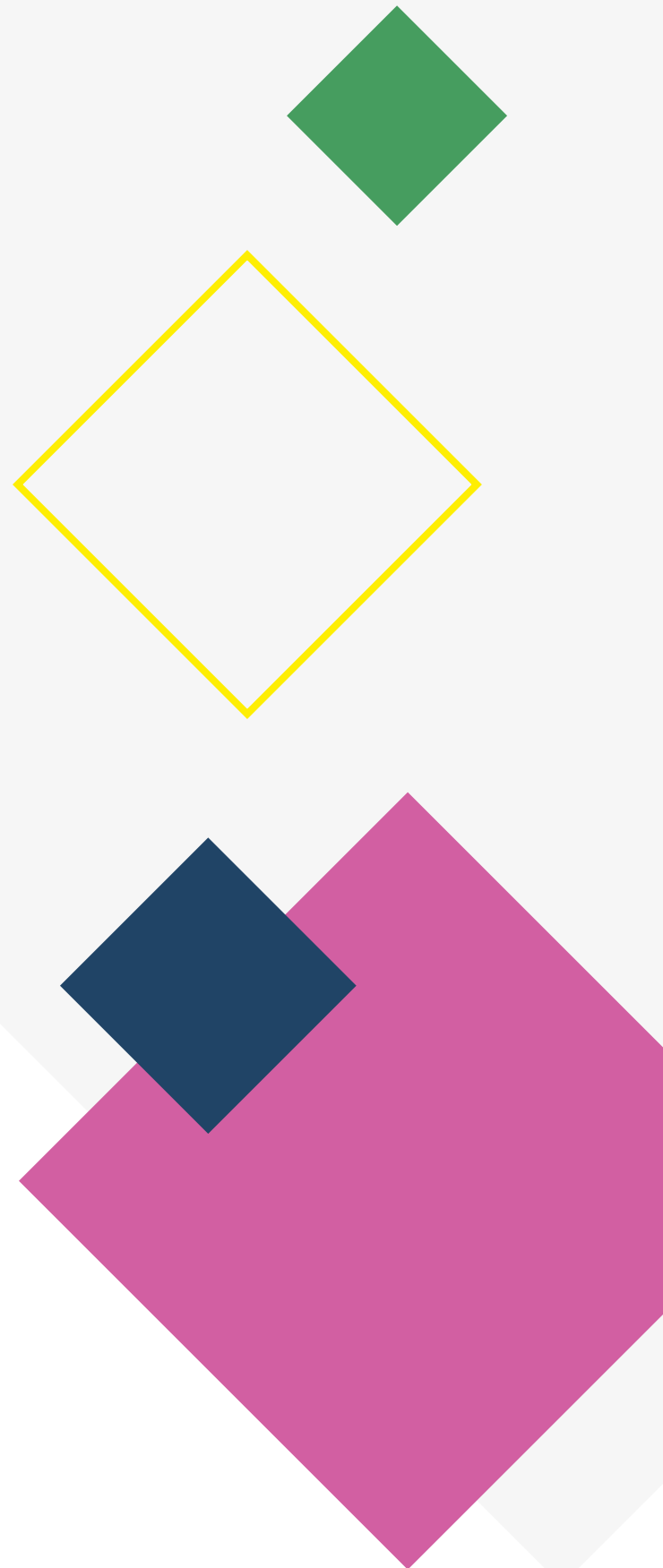
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SOLIDAR Foundation for progressive education and democratic participation is a European network of 23 members gathering several millions of citizens throughout Europe. The Foundation advances both the external policy work and the internal learning needs of its members, shaping itself as a learning house for the membership.

The following organisations have initiated and carried out the ECO-IN project, including a set of policy documents. They are the first signatories of this document and they invite all interested stakeholders in inclusive education policies to join this commitment to further promote the evidence-based policy recommendations and tools stemming from the project. If you wish your organisation to join this effort and for any further information, please contact SOLIDAR Foundation.

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