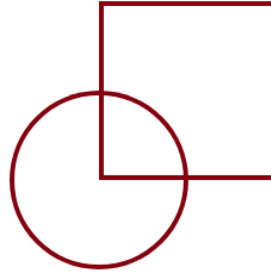


STRATEGIC NOTE



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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ORDINARY SCHOOLS IN FRANCE: AN INSUFFICIENTLY PROVEN PRINCIPLE?

Thematic cluster: ISS – Health, Society, Inclusion

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This reflection on the effectiveness of public policies is inspired by the work of Esther Duflo. Nobel Prize in Economics in 2019, where she starts from a simple observation, but one that defies comprehension: policies to fight poverty and development aid have long been implemented without really knowing whether they produced the expected effects. Her major contribution is to have contributed to establishing a real culture of empirical evaluation of public policies, particularly in developing countries. For Esther Duflo, the central question is not only how many resources to devote to the fight against poverty, but to determine which policies really work, under what conditions and at what cost. This requires rigorous evaluations, first and foremost randomized experiments¹

These research results obviously raise a more general question: can we legitimately implement a public policy without seeking to verify that it really achieves the objectives assigned to it? This question goes far beyond the sole field of the fight against poverty and can also be transposed to school inclusion policies. The latter mobilizes human, material and financial resources for the schooling of many students, so it seems obvious to question their real effectiveness. Do the measures put in place effectively promote the inclusion of the students concerned? Do we have data and evaluations to be able to affirm this?

This question is all the more significant because while it is easy to trace the history of inclusive education, it remains more difficult to test its real effectiveness, especially in light of the difficulties encountered not only by professionals, parents, but also children with so-called "special educational needs". Indeed, today, this so-called "inclusive" school is questioned or even called into question, not so much in terms of principles as in terms of the real conditions of implementation. As shown by this recent example, or in January 2026, the Senate rejected the law aimed at giving a real status to assistants of students with disabilities (AESH), by integrating them into the public service. In the field, the "support" by educational and pedagogical teams is also complex, faced with the increase and diversification of special educational needs. In addition, the Ministry of National Education plans to eliminate up to 10% of places in inclusive education, i.e. fewer ULIS by 2035.² linked to the demographic decline. This abolition is also felt by children and adolescents whose schooling cannot be provided in an ordinary environment. A trickle-down effect is taking place: the increase in the inclusion of students with disabilities in ordinary schools leads, at the same time, to a decrease in the number of places available in specialized institutes for students with so-called "severe" disabilities.

For students with disabilities who attend mainstream schooling, however, inclusion does not guarantee the absence of stigmatization. Several studies highlight experiences of rejection, social isolation or peer judgment, which are likely to affect the sense of belonging, self-esteem and well-being of the students concerned. The quality of peer relationships, the school climate and the methods of support thus appear to be determining factors for school inclusion to really translate into social inclusion.³

The theme of inclusive education is therefore particularly complex, because it places the "plural" human being at the heart of the issues. Its evaluation cannot be limited to quantitative indicators: it also requires a qualitative approach that makes it possible to grasp the lived

¹ Duflo, Esther & Kremer, Michael (2003), *"Use of Randomization in the Evaluation of Development Effectiveness"*, paper prepared for the World Bank Operations Evaluation Department Conference, Washington, D.C., 15–16 July 2003.

² <https://www.education.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/document/education-nationale-depp-ni-2026-09-pdf-508061.pdf>

³ Haft, S. L., Greiner de Magalhães, C., & Hoeft, F. (2023). A Systematic Review of the Consequences of Stigma and Stereotype Threat for Individuals With Specific Learning Disabilities. *Journal of learning disabilities*, 56(3), 193–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222194221087383>



experiences, perceptions and effects of inclusion on all the actors concerned, in order to fully understand its effectiveness.

1. Schooling in France: from segregation to inclusion

In France, the history of the schooling of students with disabilities can be classically understood through three main stages: segregation, integration and inclusion. It bears witness to a gradual evolution, ranging from a simple obligation to educate certain children with disabilities to the recognition of a real right to be welcomed as a priority within the ordinary school known as the "sector", with the implementation of specific support. This is the result of a social construction and a change in the way people look at disability. In other words, this schooling of children with disabilities is understood both in terms of societal changes and the implementation of schooling systems.

The segregation phase is characterized by the almost systematic referral of students with disabilities to specialized institutions or structures, outside of ordinary school. The word segregation refers to an organized institutional separation, not chosen by families, based on the categorization of disability. It is the exclusion of students with disabilities in structures, schools or classes that are entirely separate from other children. Education takes place in a closed environment, without regular contact with the regular school system.

The integration phase marks the first opening of the ordinary school to these pupils, but according to a conditional logic: the pupil can be admitted to an "ordinary" class provided that he adapts to the standards already in place, as the educational institution does not change much.

The inclusion phase, with the decisive turning point of the law of 11 February 2005, enshrines a paradigm shift: schooling in an ordinary environment becomes the principle, with the local school being the reference establishment. It is no longer up to the pupil to comply with the existing framework, but to the educational institution to organise compensatory measures and adapted accommodations (human support, specific measures, pedagogical accommodations) in order to guarantee the full and complete participation of pupils with disabilities in school life. To do this, an official definition of disability is established. It is envisaged as a combination of personal and environmental factors.



2. The International Framework for Inclusive Education: A Human Rights Obligation, Not an Option

According to UNESCO, the ultimate goal of inclusive quality education: to end all forms of discrimination and promote social cohesion, (UNESCO, 2017⁴, kohout-Diaz, 2018⁵).

The first text dates from June 1994, namely the Salamanca Declaration, adopted in Spain in June 1994 at the World Conference on Special Educational Needs, and is a central text in the emergence of inclusive education at the international level. It affirms that every child has a fundamental right to education and that education systems must take into account the diversity of characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs of students (UNESCO, 1994). This text does not only concern children with disabilities. It also targets children with learning difficulties, children living in poverty, children from linguistic or cultural minorities, refugee, displaced, working, nomadic or marginalized children (UNESCO, 1994).

In 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations, gave a stronger legal scope to this approach. Article 24 of the Convention recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education and requires States to guarantee an inclusive education system at all levels (United Nations, 2006). It prohibits the exclusion of a person with a disability from the general education system on the basis of his or her disability, and recognises the right to reasonable accommodation, individualised support and support measures that promote the maximum development of academic and social skills (United Nations, 2006). Inclusive education thus becomes a genuine human rights obligation, accompanied by evaluation mechanisms: a Monitoring Committee (the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), State reports and, depending on the country, complaint mechanisms.

General Comment No. 4 of this Committee clarifies this approach by distinguishing four key concepts: exclusion (direct or indirect denial of access to education), segregation (schooling in separate environments), integration (reception in an ordinary environment without sufficient transformation of the system) and inclusion itself, which presupposes a transformation of school culture, educational policies, pedagogical practices and learning environments (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). This distinction directly sheds light on France's history in terms of inclusive education, where we can rightly question whether we have moved from a logic of integration to a truly inclusive transformation of the system.

This distinction is essential for evaluating public policies, as a policy can increase the presence of students in mainstream settings without ensuring meaningful inclusion: as UNICEF points out, inclusion is not limited to physical placement in a mainstream school, but assumes that students can participate, learn, progress, benefit from appropriate supports, and be recognized as full members of the school community — which places school organization, teacher training, teaching methods, learning materials, accessibility of environments, family participation, and monitoring of student progress at the heart of the inclusion assessment (UNICEF, 2017).

The international framework therefore makes it possible to establish a demanding definition of inclusive education. The challenge is not only access to school, but the transformation of the education system. This approach requires going beyond strictly administrative indicators to

⁴ UNESCO. (2017). *A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education*. UNESCO.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248254>

⁵ Kohout-Diaz, J. (2018). *Everyone at school! Happiness, misunderstandings and paradoxes of inclusive education*. Presses universitaires de Bordeaux.



integrate more qualitative dimensions: participation, accessibility, support, learning, well-being and continuity of pathways. The international framework requires this transformation, but its effective implementation remains uneven and partial depending on the country.

3. Inclusive education as a human rights obligation: the EU to compare, not to evaluate

At the European level, inclusive education is part of a broader policy of equality, social participation and fundamental rights. The European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 places inclusive education in the framework of equal rights, autonomy and social participation (European Commission, 2021). Inclusive education is therefore not seen as a purely academic issue, but as a condition for access to rights, employment, social life and autonomy.

The Recommendation of the Council of the European Union of 28 November 2022 on pathways to academic success broadens this approach: it aims to improve academic success and prevent early school leaving, particularly for vulnerable students. Inclusion is associated with prevention, early intervention, well-being and mental health, as well as teacher training. It thus shows that special educational needs are not limited to administratively recognized students with disabilities.

The OECD proposes a complementary approach by distinguishing between means, practices and outcomes. Its analysis of equity and inclusion focuses on resources, governance, capacity building and monitoring mechanisms (OECD, 2023a). The analytical framework thus distinguishes between inputs (resources, funding, training), processes (classroom practices, school organisation, support) and outcomes (learning, well-being, pathways, participation) (OECD, 2023b). This distinction avoids reducing inclusion to administrative schooling alone.

The European Union and international organisations therefore provide several useful analytical tools. European indicators make it possible to compare education systems, but they are not enough to assess the real effectiveness of inclusion. To do this, it is necessary to link school placement data with indicators of support, pedagogical practices, quality of pathways and student participation.



4. Evaluating school inclusion in France: a timid oscillation between numbers and quality.

In France, public indicators show a significant increase in the schooling of students with disabilities. At the start of the 2025 school year, 520,600 students with disabilities are enrolled in schools, 2,000 additional AESH have been announced, nearly 480,000 inclusive pathway booklets have been opened and 67,000 booklets concern students with a personalized schooling project (Ministry of National Education, 2025). The use of AESH is a variation of the 2006 agreement and therefore a French specificity. These data make it possible to measure the deployment of the inclusive school policy, but they remain mainly focused on the number of students, human resources and administrative tools.

Data from the start of the 2024 school year confirm this logic. The Ministry indicates that more than 490,000 students with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools, that more than 132,000 AESH are mobilized, that more than 308,568 inclusive pathway booklets are open, that 100 schooling support centers are deployed in four prefigurative departments and that nearly 11,000 ULIS are open in primary and secondary education (Ministry of National Education, 2024). These indicators provide information on the implementation of public policy, but they do not always make it possible to know whether students are receiving effective support, sufficient schooling time or truly adapted pedagogical adaptations. During exams, however, precise lists exist, notifying the accommodations granted by the MDPH for both oral and written tests. Overtime, type of font, format of subjects: these adjustments are not enough to reflect a real change in professional practices.

A long-documented evaluation deficit

This observation is not new: as early as 2013, a parliamentary question already relayed the observation of the Court of Auditors that no evaluation of the performance of the educational support system was available, as the existing reports were limited to quantitative data, number of pupils, establishments, and organisation of timetables. The problem has therefore been documented for more than ten years, without having really been resolved.

The Court of Auditors goes further than this observation

In its 2024 report, the Court does not limit itself to pointing out this lack of data: it questions the model itself, deeming it imperative to review a situation marked by a preponderant use of human support, to the detriment of accessibility measures that have remained insufficiently developed. It also notes that teachers and AESH themselves feel that they lack tools and preparation in initial and continuing education for situations that sometimes exceed their competences.

A method that reveals the extent of the void

To partially fill this data gap, the Court of Auditors⁶ had to conduct its own field survey: a qualitative analysis based on visits to five to six schools in five departments, with semi-structured interviews with school heads, teachers, caregivers, staff and families. This methodological choice is in itself revealing: the Court had to produce the qualitative data itself,

⁶ <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2024-09/20240916-Inclusion-scolaire-des-enfants-en-situation-de-handicap.pdf>



due to the lack of existing administrative data; a sign that the Ministry does not carry out this type of evaluation on a routine basis.

An inconsistency noted by the unions

Some trade union analyses point to an internal contradiction in the report: the Court would admit the lack of evaluation of practices while highlighting the increasing costs of human support, which weakens its own recommendation to reduce the use of AESH. How can a system be judged "too costly" without data on its real effectiveness?

The DEPP provides an important historical reading. Between 2006 and 2024, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream education tripled, with a particularly strong increase in secondary education (DEPP, 2025). Students with disabilities continue their schooling longer than in 2006 and are more often welcomed full-time than before (DEPP, 2025). However, they leave the school system even earlier than other students, and part-time schooling remains more frequent in primary education than in secondary education (DEPP, 2025). These data therefore make it possible to qualify the observation of progress: access is increasing, but pathways remain unevenly secured.

The limits of a purely quantitative reading

The Court of Auditors stresses that the number of students enrolled in school is not sufficient to measure the effectiveness of inclusion. It notes a strong increase in schooling in mainstream education since 2005, but notes that French policy remains strongly structured around human support and the growing role of AESH (Court of Auditors, 2024). This orientation carries a risk: reducing inclusion to individual compensation, while educational accessibility, coordination between actors and the evaluation of the real quality of schooling remain insufficiently developed (Court of Auditors, 2024). In other words, the available data provide information on the number of students, but not on the real effectiveness of the support and adjustments implemented.

The Defender of Rights: a notification that does not guarantee effectiveness

The Defender of Rights confirms this observation by insisting on the breaches of rights linked to the difficulties of human support. In its 2022 report, it identifies several concrete shortcomings: absence of AESH despite notification, insufficient support, reduction in the time spent at school, lack of support during certain times such as the canteen, recruitment difficulties and lack of training for teachers and AESH (Defender of Rights, 2022). These situations show that a right notified administratively is not necessarily an effective right. The gap between the notification and its actual implementation is precisely what quantitative indicators do not allow us to measure.

Exam arrangements: continuity and efficiency to be questioned

This question of effectiveness also arises for exam accommodations. In its 2026 decision, the Defender of Rights notes that some students may be refused accommodations to exams even though they benefited from them during their schooling (Defender of Rights, 2026). It recommends guaranteeing the continuity of accommodations between schooling and exams, and avoiding a new systematic examination of the file when the adaptations have already proven their worth during the school year (Defender of Rights, 2026). This observation is in line with that of the Court of Auditors: the existence of an accommodation, whether it is human support or an exam adaptation, says nothing about its real effectiveness if it is not evaluated over time. Inclusion must therefore be thought of up to certification, and not only during ordinary



schooling, with a continuous evaluation of what these accommodations really produce for students.

The real time spent in school, a still insufficient indicator

The articulation between ordinary schools and the medico-social sector is also central to assessing the effectiveness of inclusion. The IGAS-IGÉSR report on Act II of inclusive schools insists on cooperation between the National Education, families, MDPHs and medico-social actors (IGAS & IGÉSR, 2025). It recalls that in 2021-2022, more than three-quarters of students with disabilities at pre-primary level were enrolled full-time, compared to nearly 95% in elementary school (IGAS & IGÉSR, 2025). The actual time spent in schooling is therefore an essential indicator, as it makes it possible to distinguish administrative schooling from actual presence, thus agreeing with the Court of Auditors' observation on the limits of purely quantitative data.

Pathways between ordinary school and medico-social education to be evaluated jointly

The DREES data extend the analysis to medico-social structures. At the end of 2022, 173,790 places were recorded in 4,030 medico-social establishments and services for children and adolescents with disabilities, for 174,160 young people supported (DREES, 2025a). Among 6-15 year olds followed by a medico-social structure, 92% are in school, 64% of which are in an ordinary environment and 28% exclusively within the medico-social establishment (DREES, 2025b). This share in an ordinary environment has increased from 47% at the end of 2010 to 64% at the end of 2022 (DREES, 2025b); a development which, in itself, says nothing about the quality of the support actually received in these intersecting pathways.

Declared disability and real access to schooling

The DREES also shows that disability is not limited to administrative recognition. In 2022, 27% of young people aged 5 to 20 in ordinary housing reported at least one significant impairment in function, 16% at least one significant functional limitation and 10% limitations related to memory, concentration or organisation (DREES, 2025c). The school enrolment rate is 91% for young people without limitations, 86% for those with a significant functional limitation, and 77% for those declaring a restriction of activity (DREES, 2025c). These differences suggest that effective access to schooling varies according to the type and intensity of needs: a dimension that an assessment focused on administrative recognition alone cannot capture.

MDPH delays, a direct factor in the inefficiency of developments

Finally, CNSA data reveal a concrete factor of inefficiency: the processing times of MDPHs. In 2023, more than 6 million people benefited from at least one right opened by a MDPH, 1.8 million filed a request for opening or review, and 3.8 million rights were granted (CNSA, 2025a). The average processing time is 4.6 months for children, but the summary of MDPH activity reports reports a stock of 1.77 million pending applications as of 31 December 2023, with delays of up to 9 months (CNSA, 2025a, 2025b). These delays have a direct effect on access to the PPS, the AESH, the ULIS or a medico-social orientation; illustrating, once again, that a right notified late or insufficiently monitored loses part of its effectiveness, regardless of its formal existence.



5. Making the invisible visible: the critical role of associations in the evaluation of inclusive education

Associations play a decisive role in the critical evaluation of inclusive education: they document what public statistics struggle to capture, thus filling part of the qualitative gap identified above.

In its #JaiPasEcole 2025 survey of 3,603 children supported by 38 associations in the network, Unapei warns of the extent of situations without adapted schooling: 13% of children do not receive any weekly schooling hours, 38% from 0 to 6 hours, and only 19% exceed 12 hours per week (Unapei, 2025). Even more revealing, 65% of these children did not have an INE number in July 2025: an absence that makes them statistically invisible and therefore impossible to assess by existing administrative tools (Unapei, 2025).

APF France handicap shifts the criticism to the model itself, which is considered too focused on human assistance to the detriment of real accessibility (places, pedagogy, evaluations). The association is especially calling for the publication of national and academic indicators to evaluate pathways: access to high school, gaps between middle school and high school, schooling with or without AESH, location of teaching units (APF France handicap, 2026): a request that is directly related to the observation that management is currently deprived of appropriate measurement tools.

The French Federation of Dys, based on specific learning disorders, points to the same limits in terms of PAP and exam accommodations: the enforceability of rights remains poorly guaranteed, due to the lack of monitoring of their actual implementation (French Federation of Dys, 2026), an observation that overlaps with that of the Defender of Rights on the continuity of accommodations between schooling and certification.

Autisme France illustrates, through the UEMA, UEEA, ULIS and self-regulatory mechanisms, the need for individualized evaluation: inclusion cannot be measured by a uniform indicator, as needs vary from one student to another (Autisme France, n.d.).

Finally, the Disability Collective, reacting directly to the Court of Auditors' report, makes the most explicit observation: it calls for improved monitoring and evaluation of inclusion, for better measurement of the effectiveness of rights and for the production of consolidated data on actual career paths: while warning of the risk that a purely budgetary approach, precisely in the absence of data on the real effectiveness of the measures, could be used to justify a reduction in individual rights rather than an improvement in management (Collectif Handicaps, 2024).

The contributions of associations converge towards the same diagnosis: the absence of qualitative data and efficiency indicators is not a simple technical shortcoming, but has concrete effects: invisible children of statistics, unenforceable rights, adjustments not evaluated in their effects. The associations, in the absence of a dedicated public mechanism, produce themselves part of the qualitative evaluation that should normally be the responsibility of the public authorities.

The French indicators therefore show a real progression of inclusive schools, but they also reveal the limits of current evaluation. The available data mainly measure access, staffing, administrative tools and human resources. To evaluate inclusion more comprehensively, it is necessary to integrate the quality of schooling, the actual time of attendance, educational accommodations, breaks in pathways, administrative delays, coordination between actors and



the continuity of rights. Ultimately, there is a lack of qualitative evaluation and the real efficiency of the measures:

Efficiency and impact indicators (almost absent from public reports):

- Relationship between the resources committed and the results obtained (cost per pupil supported in relation to real progress): this is precisely the point raised by the contradiction raised by the unions before the Court of Auditors
- Evaluation of the actual learning of the supported students (pedagogical progression, not just attendance or notification)
- Impact of accommodations on actual success (beyond just access to the exam): no systematic data from the DEPP seems to cross-reference accommodations and success rates
- Evaluation of the quality of coordination between actors (School, MDPH, medico-social, families): cooperation is recommended but rarely measured in its concrete effects

Indicators from the perspective of students and families:

- School well-being and mental health of supported students (mentioned as a priority by the 2022 EU Council recommendation, but not statistically monitored in France)
- Satisfaction and perception of families on the real quality of support (beyond one-off associative surveys)
- Listening to and participation of the students themselves in the construction of their career

Continuity and Break Indicators:

- Breaks in career paths, changes of orientation suffered (and not chosen), partial or temporary dropouts: the DEPP has few longitudinal data on this point
- Becoming post-school: professional integration, further studies, social autonomy; whereas this is precisely the final issue recalled in the introduction (access to rights, employment, social life)

Indicators of appeals and litigation:

- Number of referrals to the Defender of Rights or litigation related to inclusive education: an indirect but revealing indicator of the gap between notified and effective rights

In conclusion, this requirement for evaluation, which is consubstantial with all public policies, which leads to questioning not only the intentions of a public policy, but also its real effects on the ground, shows the shortcomings in terms of inclusive education. Admittedly, quantitatively, the data show an increase in the number of pupils enrolled in school and a deployment of resources (adaptation of tests or human assistance). But a rigorous evaluation of inclusive education requires the articulation of qualitative and quantitative research, and not limited to statistical data. Explicit interviews conducted with the various stakeholders: teachers, AESH, families, associations are essential, but above all they must give a voice to the first concerned: the students themselves.

The number of pupils included in an ordinary environment alone is not enough to measure the effectiveness of an inclusion policy. It is also necessary to question the nature of the results obtained: what types of exams do these pupils manage to take, and under what conditions? What happens to them then, particularly in terms of integration into the professional path and, more broadly, social integration? And beyond the measurable indicators, what is their experience within the school?

These questions refer to a more fundamental question: is inclusion, as it is implemented today, really designed for all students with disabilities, or does it mainly benefit those whose needs



are most compatible with the functioning of the ordinary environment? In other words: inclusion for all, or inclusion for some?

The principles of inclusive education have been reinforced with an approach based on professional and social perspectives. But as Ester Duflot highlights in her research, in developing countries, a lot of money is spent on education, health, micro-credit, infrastructure, but the fact that a program is intuitively beneficial does not mean that it actually has an impact. Finally, recognizing the limits of inclusion is not to question its principle, but to reject a dogmatism that, for lack of sufficient resources, transforms a policy of emancipation into a new form of exclusion, this time masked by the inclusive discourse itself and all the more deleterious because it is invisible.

