

The SENSEI project: ADVANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION ACROSS EUROPE



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"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

Audre Lorde, Caribbean-American writer and activist (1934-1992).

The "School Education for Sustainable and Equal Inclusion" (SENSEI) project, funded by the European Union and delivered by a consortium of 11 organisations across the continent¹, is dedicated to researching and promoting inclusive education within European classrooms. Recognising the challenges educators face in diverse learning environments, SENSEI equips both pre-service and in-service teachers with knowledge and methodologies to address effectively the varied needs of all learners. The project contributes

thus to the promotion of the United Nations sustainable development goals and the Agenda 2030, more specifically goal 4, quality education².

The ultimate goal is to help every student, regardless of background or ability, to feel valued and included – an approach proven to improve academic achievement. Along these lines, SENSEI adopts a holistic approach to inclusion, focusing on students with special educational needs, including high-achieving individu-

¹ The Danish, Portuguese and Italian Associations of History Teachers collaborate with Ikastolen Elkartea (Spain), the CSU Leskovac (Serbia), Global Impact Institute from Prague, Labyrinth in Brno (Czech Republic), and the Universities of Florence (Italy) and Wroclaw (Poland) in this project coordinated by EUROCLIO, the European Association of History Educators. This project started in June 2023 and will end in June 2026. See <https://euroclio.eu/projects/school-education-for-sustainable-and-equal-inclusion/>

² See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>



Icebreaker activity at the SENSEI conference in Leskovac, November 2024/Private photo.

als, learners from migrant backgrounds, members of national, cultural, or religious minorities, students from varied socioeconomic contexts, individuals identifying as LGBTQI+, and promoting equitable representation of female students as well as equitable opportunities for all age groups. SENSEI promotes practices that celebrate diversity and provide every student with the opportunity to thrive. This involves actively creating safe, collaborative learning environments, teaching the value of inclusive behaviours, and encouraging proactive participation from every individual.

Beyond curriculum development, SENSEI actively cultivates a network of educators committed to inclusive practices. Through webinars, workshops, and collaborative events, the project facilitates sharing best practices and innovative approaches to inclusion. An international conference was organised in November 2024 in Leskovac, Serbia, and in April



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2025 we organised a plenary session within the Euroclio Annual Conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, with the aim of gathering teachers from different European countries to discuss and share their views. This gave us the opportunity to meet educational experts with experience in different areas of both formal and non-formal education coming from different countries. Most attendants came seeking partnership, collaboration and opportunities to meet colleagues and share information, methods and experiences. The following pages are a result of our work in this project as well as of our reflections after organising the above-mentioned events.

Considering that the successful implementation of inclusive practices depends to a great extent on teachers, their training becomes fundamental. Which is why the development of a university training module blueprint and an online, self-paced professional development course emphasising participatory and scaffolding techniques are central to this project. These resources make inclusive education methodologies more accessible to educators, enhancing the learning experience by leveraging the individual strengths and skills of students.

WHAT WE UNDERSTAND AS INCLUSION

One challenge we experienced at the beginning of this project was that, coming from different backgrounds, we had different experiences regarding inclusion and exclusion processes. Not all countries are in the same stage regarding the process of inclusion and we did not all have the same collectives in mind, but we all agreed that we wanted to collaborate and learn from each other's experiences to transmit our knowledge and experiences to as many teachers and future teachers as possible.

This project gathers together professionals from different fields and offers an opportunity for collaboration between teachers' associations, schools and universities, which allows us to approach the topic of inclusion from varied perspectives and to multiply the angles from which we consider and discuss how to promote inclusive environments. Despite the diversity of our backgrounds –we are secondary history teachers, teacher trainers, trainers in non-formal education, university professors, members of NGOs...-, we face similar challenges related to inclusion of all our stu-



Inclusive education begins with the assumption that all children have a right to be in the same educational space, and it is generally considered a human rights matter (International Conference of Madrid, 2010; UNESCO-IBE, 2016). One of its main aims is to ensure social justice and the promotion of democratic schools characterised by diversity.

dents, which is why we believe there is a lot we can learn from each other.

Even if we are aware that efforts to promote inclusion in education started already decades ago due to concerns around special education and learners with disabilities, nowadays we have a broader understanding of inclusion. We believe that inclusion does not only concern students with disabilities and individuals at risk of marginalization, which of course should be granted the support they require, but it is an issue for all learners in general within a school system that needs to respond effectively to a diversity of educational needs. We need to recognise and value the heterogeneity of our classrooms and see the diversity of our students as a resource to enhance their learning (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). This is why we have adopted a broad definition of inclusion and thus aim at addressing different types of exclusion, as mentioned in the introduction. Furthermore, we believe that inclusion is not only an issue when we have someone considered “different” or disadvantaged in our classroom; inclusion is always present, since it implies accepting and valuing diversity and we are all different. Recalling Mel Ainscow’s words: “Every student matters and matters equally”.

Furthermore, instead of focusing on individuals, we should focus on the environment and the need to remove barriers for the participation and learning of all our students. When we think of barriers, there are material barriers which we can easily identify -and are often related to the teaching materials and resources we use-, and other not so obvious immaterial barriers, of which we should be aware in order to improve the sense of belonging and participation of learners. Because inclusion is about accessibility –being able to learn as much as possible thanks to different dynamics and strategies that promote access to information and effective participation of students in the learning process-; but it is also an issue of identity and belonging –feeling an identification with the topics and collectives

about which we teach improves the sense of belonging, meaningfulness and engagement in the learning process of students-. Central to our work is thus to value every learner as active protagonist in a shared educational environment, reducing all possible obstacles and existing barriers to full participation and learning. As Booth and Ainscow (2002) remind us, inclusion is a complex, dynamic, and ever-evolving process that aims at promoting the presence, participation and learning of all students.

Last but not least, inclusive education begins with the assumption that all children have a right to be in the same educational space, and it is generally considered a human rights matter (International Conference of Madrid, 2010; UNESCO-IBE, 2016). One of its main aims is to ensure social justice and the promotion of democratic schools characterised by diversity, especially considering the high school dropout rates in some of our countries.

HISTORY EDUCATION AND INCLUSION

Most members of this project are history teachers, and when we started preparing the different trainings we had one main question in mind: what can history teaching do to engage, motivate and offer positive references to students so that they feel included and confident to participate and learn as much as possible?

We are aware that history lessons often deal with the rather abstract notion of “people from the past”, without taking into account the diversity existing within past societies. In this project, we want to move away from this abstract notion and show our students that people in the past were all different. We need to recognise the complexity and diversity of past societies in order to understand better the diversity complexity of the present.

Furthermore, we acknowledge the close connections between history and identity and the role that history education plays in the process of identity formation, both collective and as individuals. We are aware of the ways in which the image we currently have of certain collectives has been partly created through education and in this case history education and how teaching history through critical approaches can contribute to the deconstruction of previous notions of “us” and “them”. This critical approach to history education can also contribute to understand how we have ignored certain collectives in history, so that we can make them present and give them voice in our lessons.

This does not mean teaching a fragmented and disconnected history of diverse collectives, but rather trying to include different hitherto marginalised, forgot-



Workshop in Leskovac conference, November 2024/Private photo.

ten or silenced protagonists, voices and perspectives into the big history we teach. Sometimes for the sake of creating a national identity, minorities have been silenced; collectives that were considered deviant were ignored with the aim of creating a more uniform view of society; trying to construct a narrative of progress in our societies has often led to forget those collectives that did not fit into this image. We believe that we should include all those views and perspectives in the bigger picture and connect them to the main events that mark the evolution of our societies. The history of enslaved people in Portuguese colonial past, the invisibility of the Gypsy-Roma-Traveller community in the UK or the image given of Polish immigrants in history textbooks, constitute some of the examples we presented in our webinars to illustrate a critical approach to how history teaching has dealt with such collectives and what we can do to include them in our history lessons.

Through the participation of teachers from different countries and contexts both in the webinars and in the events we have organised in Leskovac³ and Bratislava, we have had inspiring conversations where we have seen how there are many different collectives in history that have been excluded or silenced for various reasons. Not all countries have had the same evolution or have faced the same challenges, but we were able to identify patterns of excluded collectives. The discussions held with teachers from different contexts have shown that raising awareness of these exclusions is the first step to try to include those collectives in the bigger picture of the history we teach in our classrooms.

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Not only because we may have students that identify with those collectives and we need to offer them positive references with which they can build a more positive image, but because we should all be aware, recognise and value the diversity in our societies.

Once we are aware of this, the next step is how to promote such a critical approach in the classroom in order to promote inclusive learning settings. Our aim is to give voice and visibility to those hitherto silenced and invisible collectives in our lessons and teaching materials, so that we can offer our students possibilities to participate and contribute with their diverse references, presenting sources and teaching materials that contain multiple perspectives and including topics and historical figures that represent positive examples. It is important to motivate students, so that they feel confident to participate in the classroom. Because our priority is to make them feel that they belong in the classroom and that they learn as much as they can. As result of the multiple discussions, trainings and exchanges we

3 See <https://euroclio.eu/2024/12/03/inclusive-education-in-action-takeaways-from-the-sensei-conference/>



Discussion groups at the plenary session of the SENSEI Project in the EUROCLIO Annual Conference in Bratislava, April 2025/Private photo.

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have carried out throughout this project, we would like to make some suggestions that take into consideration topics, perspectives and approaches.

- Raise awareness of the language we use in history lessons, avoiding concepts that may sound too partial or suggest a Eurocentric and uncritical perspective about sensitive events in history.
- Listen to our students, to their interest, questions and needs. Give them voice and help them find the answers to their questions.
- Offer them the freedom to choose: do not take for granted that they will be interested in specific topics, but give them the opportunity to decide. When carrying out projects about global topics that we can approach from different perspectives, offer students the opportunity to choose the historical figures or specific contexts they want to deal with. The aim is to let them choose a topic they identify with, leaving options open without labelling anyone.

- Offer positive examples, paying attention to the contributions made in various areas by collectives hitherto marginalised. Include the historical references and knowledge that our students bring to the classroom when we explain different historical periods, especially if we think they will offer positive references that can motivate them.
- Include more narratives of opposition and resistance in our lessons. For example, focusing on how enslaved people resisted slavery, history of marronage, giving voice to those people forgotten in official narratives through what we call the recovery of historical memory, histories of resistance of Roma people, etc.
- Do not ignore controversial topics, introduce them in the classroom and show the historical roots of many of the debates taking place in our current societies –for example colonialism, minority groups, gender issues...
- Offering a diversity of sources and promoting teaching strategies that promote multiperspectivity: looking at events, protagonists and processes we are teaching from various and often contradicting perspectives -depending on national affiliation,

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The SENSEI Tree, an opportunity to share ideas and let our community grow. Leskovac conference, November 2024.

religion, ethnicity, gender, social class, past experiences...- and using a variety of sources to overcome "official" historical narratives.

In sum, as we mentioned in the webinar series we organised in the spring of 2024, we suggest helping our students develop a critical approach and promote historical thinking skills to offer them the tools to reflect on the absence of certain topics and collectives in our history lessons, consider how the image we have of certain groups has been constructed and the need to deconstruct them, offer them examples of how to include certain collectives in the big picture of the history we teach by underlining connections, exchanges, contributions, and offer them a variety of sources so that they become aware of the complexity of history and the diversity of the past, give them the chance to investigate the history of communities that have been hitherto forgotten contributing thus to make these communities visible and recognising them.

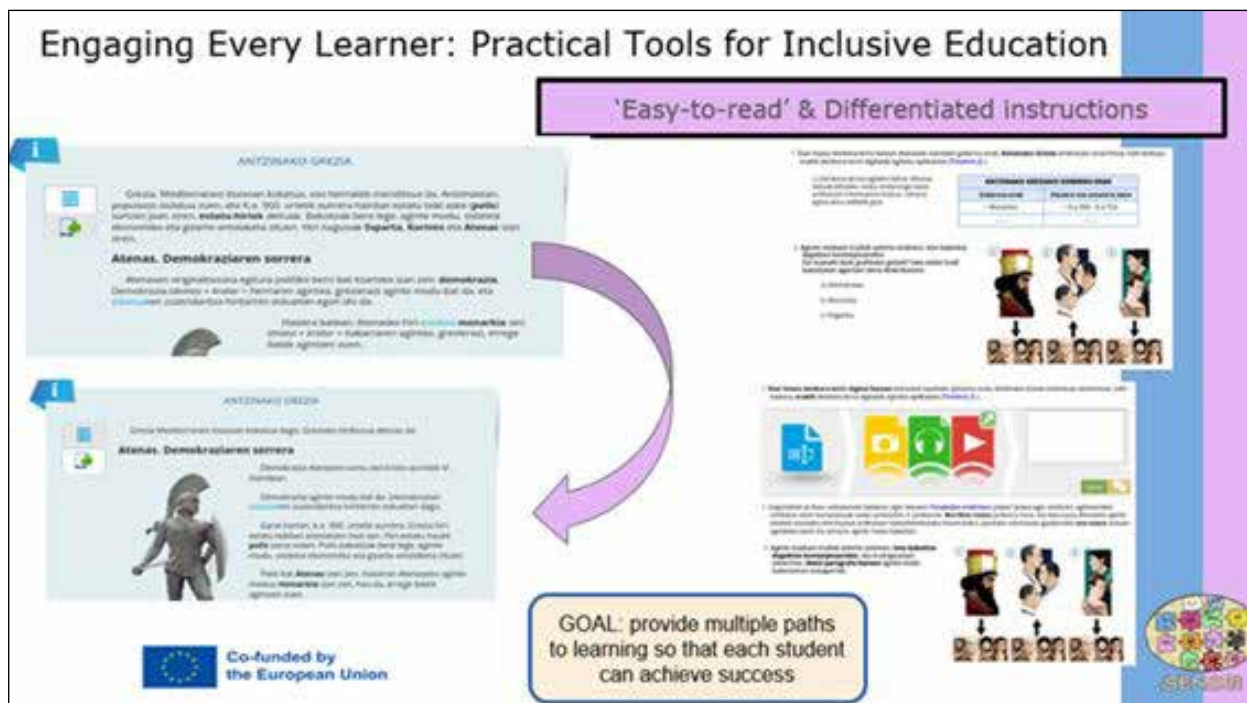
Several workshops held in our international conference in Leskovac dealt with reflections about the kind of history we teach and led to interesting discussions about inclusive history teaching: from historical memory and silenced histories, to understanding how historical biases and stereotypes are created, as well as strategies and proposals to deal with and include groups that

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have long been absent in our history lessons. Besides, several workshops introduced practical activities to foster empathy and counter prejudices and discrimination, which are at the core of many excluding attitudes we currently encounter in our classrooms.

As for the plenary session in Bratislava, we had the opportunity to discuss and share our views about how we teach about countries that have been involved in colonialism -both former colonial empires as colonised countries-, countries that have undergone nation building processes and have made other national minorities invisible, or have expelled and marginalised religious minorities, countries that have experienced authoritarian and dictatorial regimes which have imposed specific views about the past that excluded those who opposed them or those seen as a threat, those who have built a national identity based on pro-



Slide of a webinar about UDL showing teaching materials adapted for differentiated instruction, from our webinar series of spring 2024/private photo.

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gress and modernisation and have excluded those communities that were perceived as not adapting to modernisation,... One of the conclusions we have drawn from this plenary session held in Bratislava was that, although national contexts vary a lot, there are big themes that we find in all countries, such as colonialism, empires, nation-building processes, wars, revolutions, industrialisation processes... People in the past were being born and died, ate and slept, learnt and worked. In all cases, we can identify excluded individuals and groups and excluding narratives of the past, which we can deconstruct and use to understand

the nature of history as a discipline and to give voice and make visible those collectives that were hitherto absent from our history lessons. Furthermore, another recurrent idea in those conversations was the interest of focusing on alternative views, dealing with social history and bottom-up perspectives instead of limiting to political history and top-down interpretations of the past, as well as highlighting interconnections and exchanges that take place between different groups in the past. This means offering new, more plural and inclusive views about history.

Many teachers will argue that this is a difficult endeavour if we do not count with sources to exemplify these multiple perspectives. We agree that it is often difficult for teachers to find enough and appropriate sources to provide their students with multiple perspectives and there is still much work to do in this sense. But we also think that this should be a collective task and we would like to draw attention to the work done by Historiana in collecting sources and teaching materials that we can use to design history lessons that respond to this need of plural and diverse views⁴. The work done by the Historical Association in the UK is also noteworthy and we believe the resources they offer can be very useful for history teachers⁵.

4 See <https://historiana.eu/>

5 See <https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/resource/10250/diversity-resources-and-links-for-secondary-histor>



Workshop in Leskovac conference, November 2024/Private photo.

INCLUSION, CLASSROOM DYNAMICS AND ORGANISATION OF SCHOOLS

We also want to address issues of participation and accessibility, which make learning possible. We need to think seriously about how to ensure the participation of all our students in the activities we carry out in our lessons, as well as promoting accessibility and eliminating obstacles and barriers that hinder participation and learning of all. In this respect the multiple conversations we had in our group, as well as the feedback we have received from participants in the training events we have carried out, offer us interesting suggestions to make:

Focusing on students and adapting to different learning styles and abilities, interests, motivations to ensure equal opportunities and provide equal education for all our students.

There is already much research and experience about the role of the classroom dynamics we implement in the classroom: introducing cooperative strategies and cooperative work in the classroom can be very helpful to promote the participation of all our students (Johnson and Johnson, 2005; Albalat et al., 2024; Kagan, 2021).

The organisation of space plays also a very important role: open spaces adapted to various needs, the possibility to move between spaces, or the classroom setting help to promote cooperation and participation, at the same time that they improve accessibility.



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The role of school management and the culture of the school is also quite important. We should involve all actors within the school system, from the macro to the micro level, to promote more inclusive school cultures. We need to consider how the schools promote inclusive practices, promoting collaboration between teachers to share knowledge and experiences, develop their awareness, support each other and work together to promote inclusive environments. Schools can provide spaces, training, technical resources, time schedules... that help to improve the resources teachers count on to promote inclusive settings.

Regarding learning methodologies applied in the classroom, Project Based Learning (PBL) has proven to be a very appropriate strategy to improve motivation and participation and thus enhance the learning of students. PBL offers the opportunity to be more flexible and adapt to different rhythms and ways of learning. It gives the opportunity to give more differentiated support to the students and thus adapt better to the needs of each of them. PBL gives students voice

and the possibility to choose and it offers opportunities for peer learning, allows students to progress at their own path, and promotes a sense of belonging. As teachers, we are aware that it is very important to pay attention to the different learning styles and levels, skills, interests, motivations, expectations, needs, ... of our students to ensure equal opportunities and quality education for all.

Furthermore, some of the partners in this project have experience in implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the teaching materials they create. In one of the webinars that took place in spring 2024 attendants could see examples of digital textbooks adapted to the principles of UDL, aiming at providing learners with multiple means of engagement, representation and action. Teachers insisted that we should start by activating students and offering them opportunities to become engaged in their learning process. Besides, teaching materials should be adapted to ensure that they represent information in different ways, by creating texts that are easier to read and using concept maps, images and videos to support written explanations. Moreover, key concepts were highlighted and glossaries with their definitions were added to help students identify the most important conceptual contents.

Meanwhile, we saw how important it is to offer students multiple means of action and expression, so that they can have different options to express what they know and to communicate what they have learnt. As teachers, we should keep a common goal, but we should also offer differentiated instruction and provide multiple paths to learning, so as to ensure the success of all our students.

As some of the teachers participating in our webinars declared, sometimes there are no adapted textbooks or materials, and teachers need to adapt them on their own -adding more images, introducing a progression in the complexity of activities, avoiding distractors-. In



(...) the need to be aware of the importance of knowing how students feel and how to attend to their emotional well-being. Many of the educators attending the workshops reflected on the importance of addressing emotions, taking students' views and experiences into account, not labelling them, listening to them and being careful not to ignore those students that go almost unnoticed.

such cases, having some knowledge of UDL principles or even some examples of adapted didactic materials at their disposal can be very helpful.

Moreover, as our colleagues from CSU in Leskovac remind us, we need to look beyond the borders of school and take the work and experiences of non-formal education into account. It is useful to implement practices, methods and techniques that have proven to be successful in non-formal education because with certain modifications they could contribute to create of a more positive climate in the classroom and consequently facilitate the process of inclusion of all students.

Throughout the different events we have organised we have heard from teachers that they often feel alone, working on their own, that they lack support. We have identified a need of training, teachers want to know about practices that work and they can implement in their classrooms. The conference in Leskovac offered the opportunity to attend workshops where teachers from different countries shared their innovative teaching methods and practice: the use of new digital educational tools for students with learning difficulties, the interest of focusing on executive functions and activated learning approaches, the advantages of learning centres to improve the learning of all our students, the importance of cooperative work, as well as the need to adapt to the multiple skills of our students. Innovative approaches to assessment were also discussed, and as several teachers commented, instead of just looking at what learners cannot do, we should focus more on what they can do and improve their self-confidence.

In fact, one of the leading ideas in most workshops was the need to increase the protagonism of learners in the classroom and the importance of promoting motivation and active participation of all students. Many participants underlined the advantages of using active methodologies to activate students and give them the opportunity to participate and take the lead in their learning process. Although it is more demanding for learners, it offers the opportunity to adapt better to different ways of learning. Connected to this, cooperative work provides means for students that may feel lost in bigger groups and become more actively involved in small groups, where we can promote positive interdependence and active participation of all students.

Another important aspect we discussed within the project is the need to be aware of the importance of knowing how students feel and how to attend to their emotional well-being. Many of the educators attending the workshops reflected on the importance of ad-

dressing emotions, taking students' views and experiences into account, not labelling them, listening to them and being careful not to ignore those students that go almost unnoticed. Along these lines, we would also like to mention the educational game "SENSEI's Puzzles of Empathy", which encourages students to navigate social and ethical dilemmas, promoting empathy and proactive engagement both within the classroom and society.

TRAINING FUTURE TEACHERS

Apart from the work we are doing to provide in-service teachers with training and resources to promote inclusive learning environments, we would like to present here the work that our partners from the universities of Florence and Wrocław are doing to create materials and resources to train future teachers. This work responds to the existing agreement on the importance of training future teachers to raise their awareness of the importance of inclusion and promote their future engagement, apart from offering them resources and practices to improve their skills (UNESCO-IBE 2008, 48th International Conference on Education).

Sharing examples of concrete teaching-learning strategies and techniques, collected during the course of the project from the European teachers, broadens the range of practices to be discussed and potentially implemented by prospective teachers. The fact that the practices come from real teachers and have been tested in real schools with real students adds to their credibility and helps overcome the potential feeling of "being all alone" with non-standard approaches to teaching and learning that go beyond one's personal experiences from their own school. It is encouraging to know that there are teachers who really let their pupils choose the contents or the form of a lesson, who teach without textbooks but with the use of clay, sticks, play-doh, whose pupils sing, dance, perform; sketch, paint, or build; and are prompted to take perspectives and ask questions – to their teacher, to their peers, or to a chatbot ("What would the Huns say about the fall of the Roman Empire?") – instead of just reading and memorizing, taking notes and filing gaps. Using such practices in the process of teacher training helped prospective teachers experience those practices themselves and feel engaged, amused, motivated or... tired but accomplished.

Prospective teachers were encouraged to develop those practices further, build more teaching strategies and develop lesson plans that would anticipate potential exclusions of various kinds, and try to address

them pre-emptively. The use of the *Planungsmatrix* developed by Alois Ecker from the University of Vienna helped reflect upon lesson sequences that take into consideration not only factual details, broader concepts, methods of inquiry, but also students' skills, capabilities and preferences, and shift the focus of the lesson from the teacher or textbook towards the learners in all their complexity and variety⁶.

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