

Global Conference on Inclusive Education a Huge Success!

Contributed by Katrina Ward
28 October 2009

Global Conference on Inclusive Education Confronting the Gap: Rights, Rhetoric and Reality? Return to Salamanca 21-23 October 2009, Salamanca, Spain

The Global Conference of Inclusion International on Inclusive Education last week was a huge success and was greatly enjoyed by all! The conference, organised by Inclusion International, Inclusion Europe and INICO University, took place in Salamanca in Spain and was attended by over 400 participants from around the world, including self-advocates and their families, representatives from disability organisations, professors, researchers and experts. The three-day conference began with a warm welcome to participants by Ingrid Körner, President of Inclusion Europe and Gordon Porter, Director of Inclusion Canada and honorary member of Inclusion International. Gordon Porter, a long-standing champion for disabled people's rights, was present when the initial Salamanca Statement was made in 1994. The Statement, issued by the UNESCO, called for the international community to endorse the approach of inclusive schools by implementing practical and strategic changes. Back in 1994, representatives from 92 governments and 25 international organisations came together in Salamanca, where they agreed upon the statement and adopted a Framework for Action to give guidance to schools on including all children, regardless of any disability they may have. At this conference, 15 years after the statement, Gordon Porter confirmed that progress has been made since 1994 however more still needs to be made. People still have underlying prejudices about what education actually means, in some countries, governments still provide money to create segregated institutions. The conference in Salamanca therefore aimed to provide people with practical examples and information to ensure that inclusive education now becomes a reality for all children.

President of Inclusion International, Diane Richler presented Inclusion International's Global Report on Inclusive Education 2009. The Global Report was initiated to highlight progress made since the Dakar Framework for Action in 1990, the Salamanca Statement in 1994 and the advent of the UNCRPD, but also to address the challenges which still exist towards achieving inclusive education. The report was compiled using information from member organisations, experts, ministries of education, grassroots organisations and experts from over 75 countries, through online surveys, focus groups and personal accounts. To download the full version of the report, go to: www.inclusion-international.org

Amongst the many inspiring speakers present at the conference, Mia Farah, a self-advocate and member of the Council of Inclusion International gave a personal view of why inclusive education is important for people with disabilities. In a short film, she revealed that inclusive education is about life; if people with disabilities do not have access to education, this also denies them access to finding a job, to integrate into society and to becoming independent. She explained how life in institutions means that people with disabilities are cut off from society and from the real world; they have no real access to education and are denied the right to make their own decisions. She stated that people with disabilities want to learn, they want to go to school with all other children. The following measures are essential if this is to become a reality:

- Strong laws to guarantee rights to education
- An inclusive education system which respects all students' needs
- Flexible programmes
- Teachers who are trained to teach all children
- More teachers in schools who have disabilities themselves
- Increased support for people with disabilities to better understand their choices

She highlighted the need to involve children with disabilities themselves in the process of achieving inclusive education. In her words: "We are the experts!"

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Vernor Muñoz, confirmed that learning is a right which all children should be entitled to, yet the old-fashioned view of education solely as a means to economic development still prevails, along with the view of education as merely a competition to achieve the best academic results. He explained that education is more than this. It means learning about diversity, culture and values, such as mutual tolerance. Education is not yet seen as a universal human right. We need to build a society in which all people have equal rights.

The Spanish Minister of Education, Ángel Gabilondo Pujol confirmed that the Salamanca Statement reflects a global consensus on the need for inclusive education, and that the support of the whole of society is essential if we are to change misconceptions about disability and to bring about full equality. He confirmed the importance of global conferences like this one in exchanging knowledge, acquiring experience, and in gaining strength.

Peter Evans, former Senior Education Analyst for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD), and Vianne Simmons, President-elect of the International Association for the Study of Intellectual Disability, looked at concrete measures which can be taken to achieve inclusive education:

- Funding: Increased efficiency and the transference of funds allotted from special education to mainstream schools
- Accountability & evaluation
- Teacher training to prepare teachers as an essential part of their overall training
- Provision of information & resources
- Support services in and outside schools
- Education policies: Strong legislation
- Greater involvement of parents & more knowledge-sharing
- Flexible curriculum & classroom organisation to meet all students' needs

Vianne concluded by stating that: "The quality of our education should be measured by the quality of education we promote for our most vulnerable children."

The conference also featured a large number of workshops, giving participants the opportunity to air their views and to take part in discussions on a more intimate level with experts, academics and representatives of disability organisations.

In one thematic workshop on advocacy, Vanessa Dos Santos, from Down Syndrome Society South Africa, and Bernhard Schmid, from Inclusion Europe's member organisation, Lebenshilfe Vienna, gave their views as parents of children with disabilities and discussed the role of parent organisations in bringing about inclusive education. Bernhard Schmid gave advice to parents on more effective lobbying techniques, highlighting the need for sharing best practices and advice to empower parents. Lillian Mariga, educator and advocate from Zimbabwe highlighted strong parent advocacy as an essential requirement for awareness-raising and changing attitudes in society.

In another animated workshop, representatives from Inclusion Europe's Norwegian member organisation, Norsk Forbund for Utviklingshemmede (NFU), spoke about inclusive education in Norway and highlighted the importance of including self-advocates in lobbying through adequate training. In addition, Denise Roza,

from Inclusion Europe's Russian member organisation, Perspektiva, discussed the existing barriers to inclusion in Russia and talked about activities which Perspektiva is pursuing to counteract this; including projects on teacher training, awareness-raising about disability in schools, advising schools on accessibility and breaking down stereotypes through film. Perspektiva also organises campaigns, consultations with parents and rallies to promote inclusion. In a workshop on national experiences, Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero from the European Commission informed participants about the European Disability Action Plan 2003-2010 and the three pillars upheld by this, namely: anti-discrimination, mainstreaming and accessibility. She highlighted the need for implementation of the UNCRPD at Member State and EU level. She told Inclusion Europe that the Global Conference in Salamanca would serve as strong input for the European Commission's strategies and policy-making. Other workshops gave participants the opportunity to interact with speakers from Western and Eastern Europe, New Zealand, Canada, Latin-America and the USA. At the close of the conference, the presidents of Inclusion Europe and Inclusion International Ingrid Körner and Diane Richler, reflected upon the progress made since the Salamanca Statement in 1994, and looked at the way ahead. The closing ceremony saw the presentation of the Salamanca Conference Resolution. Through this Resolution, Inclusion Europe and Inclusion International pledged to: Reaffirm commitment to the Salamanca Statement and the right to inclusive education worldwide as promoted by the UNCRPD. Support children and allow them to fulfill their academic and social potential in mainstream schools by removing existing barriers. Call on governments to ratify and implement the UNCRPD and on international agencies to step up efforts to support inclusive education. Form a global alliance to achieve Education for All and launch Initiative 24 on Article 24 of the UNCRPD on education. The many plenary sessions, discussion groups and exchanges of experience and knowledge throughout the conference provided solidarity amongst participants, a chance to see the progress made since the Salamanca Statement 15 years ago and a strong input into future policy-making to ensure that all children have access to education.