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*Literacy for Life*

# **Literacy and persons with developmental disabilities: why and how?**

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# Literacy and Persons with Developmental Disabilities: Why and How?

"All children and young people of the world, with their individual strengths and weaknesses, with their hopes and expectations, have the right to education. It is not our education systems that have a right to certain types of children. Therefore, it is the school system of a country that must be adjusted to meet the needs of all children".

(B. Lindqvist, UN-Rapporteur, 1994)

## Introduction

**The debate of how to handle children with disabilities has been raging since the traditional educational system began questioning the effectiveness of segregated institutions. Today, the struggle for ensuring the right to education for disabled children is an undeniable reality. Assuring the social integration of this largely excluded group can only begin when educational inclusion is practiced and ensured. By doing so, we can move closer to the goal of *Education for All*.**

Over half a billion persons are disabled as a result of mental, physical or sensory impairment. These persons are often limited by both physical and social barriers, which exclude them from society and prevent them from actively participating in the development of their nations. Approximately 80 per cent of the world's disabled population lives in developing countries. The key to unlocking this potential is by ensuring that Education for All becomes a reality.

Current strategies and programmes have not been sufficient to meet the needs of children and youth with disabilities who are particularly vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. In the past, efforts have consisted of specialized programmes, institutions and specialist educators. The unfortunate consequence of such differentiation, although well intended, has often been further exclusion. Education must be viewed as a facilitator in everyone's human development and functionality, regardless of barriers of any kind, physical or otherwise. Therefore, disability of any kind (physical, social and/or emotional) cannot be a disqualifier. Inclusion, thus, involves adopting a broad vision of *Education for All* by addressing the spectrum of needs of all learners.

Inclusion as we know it today has its origins in Special Education. The development of the field of special education has involved a series of stages during which education systems have explored different ways of responding to disabled children, and to students who experience difficulties in learning. In some cases, Special education has been provided as a supplement to general education provision, in other cases it has been entirely separate. In recent years, the appropriateness of separate systems of education has been challenged, both from a human rights perspective and from the point of view of effectiveness.

The following article will trace the history of the development of inclusion from its origins in special education. It will look at how education for persons with disabilities was seen before Salamanca, what is meant by 'special education' as well as why the focus broadened from the disabled to include excluded groups in general. It will also look at progress since then and the developments at the international level for persons with disabilities.

# 1 Children with Disabilities before Salamanca: The Development of Special Education

Children with disabilities have always been among the last to be offered access to education regardless of what country one observes. In the sixties and seventies, initial provision consisted of special education within segregated education provisions. Historically, children with disabilities have been treated as “in-valid” or inferior and in need of very special protection and thus as not being able to benefit from education. This conceptualization led to exclusion and the construction of institutions to accommodate these children. In this view, the child was to blame for not being able to benefit from education.

A shift towards greater understanding led to an eventual belief that all children belonged in the same school system and could not be separated. This led to a much-needed cooperation between the two systems.

Integration, which began in the West, in the late seventies and early eighties was spurred by a progressive educational ideology. The parallel system to traditional schooling that developed, came to be known as Special Education. Such a pattern has been commonly observed in most countries. The second stage in this development has taken the form of Special Needs Education. Special Needs Education, is a system of education for children with disabilities within ordinary schools. This form of education represents an effort to provide education in more ‘normal’ settings. However, a common characteristic of this provision of education is that it has been offered in special classes and not in cooperation with other ‘mainstream’ children.

## 2 From Integration to Inclusive Education

Gradually voices clamored asking for integration in education and in the late sixties and seventies, the focus shifted to integration. Integration was understood as a gradual reform of the special education system without challenging the ideological underpinning of the system. This integration took many shapes, in some cases it was merely limited to sharing the same dining hall and in others it consisted of teaching groups of children with disabilities together with other children for several hours per week. In other cases it was about individual integration, meaning that one child with a disability received all or most of his education in ordinary classes.

Dissatisfaction with progress toward integration caused demands for more radical changes in many countries. One of the main concerns with opponents to integration related to the way in which pupils come to be designated as having special needs. More specifically they resisted what has been referred to as a ‘medical model’ of assessment – within which educational difficulties are explained solely in terms of a child’s deficits. The greatest weakness of this model is that it prevented analyzing why schools failed to teach so many children successfully.

During this time, despite national policies emphasizing integration, many countries reported a significant increase in the proportions of pupils being *categorized* in order for their schools to earn additional resources. For example, an analysis of policies in Australia, England, Scandinavia and the United States, carried out by researchers in the late eighties<sup>1</sup>,

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suggested that the increased bureaucracy that was often associated with special education legislation as well as the struggles for additional resources led to an escalation in the proportion of children who came to be labeled as disabled.

These and many other deficiencies led to proposals for a re-conceptualisation of ‘special needs’. Revised thinking suggested that progress would be much more likely if we recognized that difficulties experienced by pupils resulted from the ways in which schools are currently organised and from the forms of teaching that are provided. Consequently, it was argued that schools needed to be reformed and pedagogy needed to be improved in ways that would lead them to respond positively to pupil diversity – seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for enriching learning. Furthermore, the appropriateness of separate systems of education began to be challenged from a human rights perspective as well as from the point of view of effectiveness.

## **2.1 The Birth of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education, which has its origins in special education, originally set out to meet the needs of learners who were being traditionally excluded from the school or were otherwise marginalized within the classroom. A series of shifts from focusing on the disabled child as a problem to focusing on changes in the management of the classroom, revealed surprising changes in learning. The results demonstrated benefits to those who were traditionally excluded from learning as well as all the others in the classroom. Today inclusive education or ‘inclusion in education’ is a conceptual approach aimed at achieving quality education by making changes to accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, social or psychological differences.

Inclusive education differs from previously held notion of ‘integration’ and ‘mainstreaming,’ which tended to be concerned principally with ‘special educational needs’ and implied learners changing or becoming ‘ready for’ accommodation by the mainstream. By contrast, inclusion is about the child’s right to participate and the school’s duty to accept and ensure this right. It is thus about rejecting exclusion of learners for any reasons, maximizing participation of all learners, making learning more meaningful for all children and rethinking and restructuring school policies, curricula and practices so that all learning needs can be met.

Only by removing physical and social barriers to learning, can we create truly inclusive classrooms and societies and speak of *Education for All* in a holistic sense.

Exclusion from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of communities is one of the greatest problems facing individuals in our society today. Such societies are neither efficient nor desirable.

Despite encouraging developments, there are still an estimated 130 million children not attending school. Ninety percent of them live in low and lower middle income countries, and over 80 million of these children live in Africa.<sup>2</sup> As alarming are the countless others within the school system being excluded from quality education. Among those who do enroll in primary school, large numbers drop out before completing their primary education.

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<sup>2</sup> International Consultative Forum on Education for All, 2000.

## 2.2 The Inclusive Education Debate

Implementation of inclusive education has been progressive in many countries. Some mainstream educationalists have been resistant to the idea, as well as some disability-focused organisations, which continue to argue for separate, 'specialist' services. Organisations of deaf people tend to argue, for example, that deaf children have to be educated separately in order to guarantee their right to education in the medium of sign language and access to deaf culture. Also, there are those who believe that small specialist units located in the standard school environment can provide the specialist knowledge, equipment and support for which the mainstream classroom and teacher can never provide a full substitute. Inclusion is about ensuring the participation of all children to the maximum extent possible in the education system. Nonetheless it recognises that in some cases certain children with disabilities may require additional support outside the classroom.

While Salamanca made mention of different excluded and marginalized groups, the primary targets of 'inclusion' were children with special needs. The goal of inclusion is to address the range of barriers to effective participation of all children.

## 3 The human rights perspective – towards inclusion

It can be said that the Salamanca Statement (1994) put inclusion on the agenda as well as supporting a human rights perspective in that it stated, "inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and the enjoyment and exercise of human rights." However, paving the road to inclusion began during the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All. Here the world's leaders took up the challenge of exclusion from education by stating that "*The learning needs of the disabled demand special attention. Steps need to be taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an integral part of the education system*" (Article 3.5) This brief mention of disabled groups was made possible through the determination of two NGOs representing disabled persons during the conference.

The next landmark was the 1993 United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which required member states to provide education for persons with disabilities in integrated settings and ensure that their education is an integral part of the educational system.

During this time, Spain embarked on a major project of "integration in schools" to mobilize and train the educational community, including teachers and parents to work towards a 'school for all' and lay the groundwork for new educational legislation.

UNESCO, recognizing the possibility to adapt these good practices, invited Spain to share its experiences with developing countries at a high level meeting held in October 1991 during the General Conference.

Following this meeting, several seminars and consultations were organized with senior decision-makers from mainstream and special needs education in order to dialogue on creating inclusive schools, which respond to the wide range of pupil needs. This laid the groundwork for the Salamanca Conference and created a climate favorable to inclusion.

UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994) called on the international community to endorse an approach of inclusive schools by implementing philosophical, practical and strategic changes. A total of 92 Governments and 25 international organizations agreed a dynamic

new Statement in 1994 calling for inclusive education to be the norm and adopted a Framework for Action which said ordinary schools should include all children. The Salamanca Statement proclaimed:

*“Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.”* (Salamanca Statement, Art. 2)

There were substantial outcomes from the Salamanca conference at the country level where some thirty countries benefited from technical and financial support for testing the new orientations emerging from Salamanca. Among these results were the development of a number of publications and supporting materials for managers and administrators as well as an Index for Inclusion which provides indicators to assist schools in creating inclusive cultures.

At the core of inclusive education is the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 which states,

*“Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”* (art.26 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Equally important are the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), such as the right of children not to be discriminated against, stated in Article 2 and Article 23. Article 23 stipulates that children with disabilities<sup>3</sup> should have:

*“effective access to and receive education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development.”* (Article 23)

Article 29 on the ‘Aims of education,’ expresses that the educational development of the individual is the central aims and that education should allow children to reach their fullest potential in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities. In addition, the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) are other key international human rights treaties that not only emphasize the prohibition but also the active elimination of discrimination. A logical consequence of these rights is that all children have the right to receive the kind of education that does not discriminate on any grounds such as caste, ethnicity, religion, economic status, refugee status, language, gender, disability etc. and that specific measures be taken by the State to implement these rights in all learning environments.

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<sup>3</sup> The [General Assembly resolution 56/168](#) of 19 December 2001 established an Ad Hoc Committee "to consider proposals for a comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, based on the holistic approach in the work done in the fields of social development, human rights and non-discrimination and taking into account the recommendations of the [Commission on Human Rights](#) and the [Commission for Social Development](#)."The Committee is in the process of working on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities.

While there are also very important human, economic, social and political reasons for pursuing a policy and approach of inclusive education, it is also a means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations.

It is thus imperative that schools and local authorities take the responsibility to ensure that this right is implemented. Concretely this involves:

- Initiating debates around how the community understands human rights;
- Generating collective thinking and identifying practical solutions such as how human rights can be made part of the local school curriculum;
- Linking the Human Rights movement with educational access;
- Fostering grassroots action and strengthening its ties to the policy level in order to promote protection;
- Encouraging the creation of community and children's councils where issues of access can be discussed; and
- Developing community-school mechanism to identify children not in school as well as develop activities to ensure that children enroll in school and learn.

Furthermore, adequate resources must be matched with political will, and constituent pressure maintained on governments to live up to their obligations. Ultimately, however, success will be judged by the quality of basic education provided to all learners. In the following sections we discuss how inclusion is defined and what practical steps are required to make inclusion in education a reality.

### 3.1 Defining Inclusion

UNESCO views inclusion as *'a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning.'*

Inclusion is seen as **a process** of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.<sup>4</sup> It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children.<sup>5</sup>

- Inclusion is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners. It aims towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel
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comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem. Inclusion emphasizes providing opportunities for equal participation of persons with disabilities (physical, social and/or emotional) whenever possible into general education, but leaves open the possibility of personal choice and options for special assistance and facilities for those who need it. In particular, four key elements have tended to feature strongly in the conceptualisation of inclusion.

- The four elements are as follows: *Inclusion is a process*. That is to say, inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity. It is about learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from difference. In this way differences come to be seen more positively as a stimulus for fostering learning, amongst children and adults.
- *Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers*. Consequently, it involves collecting, collating and evaluating information from a wide variety of sources in order to plan for improvements in policy and practice. It is about using evidence of various kinds to stimulate creativity and problem-solving.
- *Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students*. Here ‘presence’ is concerned with where children are educated, and how reliably and punctually they attend; ‘participation’ relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and, therefore, must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and ‘achievement’ is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely test or examination results.
- *Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement*. This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups that are statistically most ‘at risk’ are carefully monitored, and that, where necessary, steps are taken to ensure their presence, participation and achievement in the education system.

It is important to highlight that a holistic view of the education system, encompassing both the private and public system, must be taken when considering adopting an inclusive approach. Increasingly the world over, privatisation of education is on the rise. It is becoming evident that the private system of education in many countries is “competing” with the Government system. In some cases, government schools are closing because children are increasingly attending private schools. This trend could inadvertently lead to planners only planning for schools catering to poorer communities; this would inevitably be counterproductive to promoting principles of inclusion. Furthermore, in many countries the public system is generally considered lower in terms of quality of education being provided as compared to private schools. Thus, poorer children tend to be limited to the public system. It is imperative, therefore, that education planners consider both the public and the private system in planning in order to effectively address the needs of *all* learners and combat exclusion.

## **4 Inclusion and Education for All**

In the early documentation on EFA, there was a rather token mention of ‘special needs’. This has been gradually replaced by a recognition that the inclusion agenda should be seen

as an essential element of the whole EFA movement. Thus, instead of an emphasis on the idea of *integration*, (with its assumption that additional arrangements will be made to accommodate pupils seen as being special within a system of schooling that remains largely unchanged), we now see moves towards *inclusive education*, where the aim is to restructure schools in response to the needs of all pupils to move towards the ultimate goal of inclusion in society.

Although the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO 2000), provide the most up-to-date frame of reference on EFA, the documents produced as a result of a UNESCO Conference held in Salamanca, in 1994, continue to provide a valuable reference point for all those involved in lobbying for inclusive education. This Statement, and the accompanying Framework for Action, is arguably the most significant international document that has ever appeared in special education. It argues that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are:

‘...the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.’

Furthermore, it suggests, such schools can:

‘...provide an effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.’

It is essential to note that inclusive education is not a parallel initiative to EFA but to a principle of the movement. This is explained in the annex of the Dakar Framework for Action which states, “*The key challenge is to ensure that the broad vision of ‘Education for All’ as an inclusive concept is reflected in national government funding agency policies. Education for All must take account of the need of the poor and the most disadvantaged, including working children, remote rural dwellers and nomads, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, young people and adults affected by conflict, HIV/AIDS, hunger and poor health; and those with special learning needs...*” In order for EFA to be realised, children with disabilities, which are among the most marginalized and at risk for inclusion, must be ensured access to quality education. Addressing inclusion in a comprehensive manner is a major challenge to the educational community. It calls for a holistic approach which addresses the underlying causes of exclusion. UNESCO’s role is to ensure that inclusion is adopted as a cross-cutting issue so that the Education for All goals in fact do cover ALL learners.

Salamanca encourages us to look at educational difficulties in new ways. In addition to challenging the labelling of schools, it also put the issue of diversity at the core of the educational, cultural and social debate. This new direction in thinking is based on the belief that changes in methodology and organisation – made in response to pupils experiencing difficulties – can, under certain conditions, benefit all children. This primarily explains the move from focusing on children with disabilities to excluded children in general. In this way, pupils who are currently categorised as having special needs come to be seen as a stimulus for encouraging the development of richer learning environments. Inclusion in education is principally about respecting diversity in society and reflecting it in the educational community.

## **5 Towards a Convention for Persons with Disabilities: UNESCO's Role**

**UNESCO has been working with its** partners in the “*Flagship on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion*” on education Article 17 The proposed article includes provisions indicating that all persons with disabilities can choose inclusive and accessible education in their own community; provisions for specialized support including specialized training of teachers and other specialists and that accessible curriculum and teaching technologies be made to ensure the full participation of persons with disabilities; that no child be excluded from free and compulsory primary education on account of their disability; and that education be provided in a manner as to allow children with disabilities to participate in the general education system to the maximum extent possible.

This Convention, the newest human rights instrument, sends an undeniable message of inclusion to the international community of persons with disabilities. In addition to being an important normative instrument which places a high priority on accessibility and mainstreaming disability into the development agenda, it is also a unique participatory process that has involved many NGOs, which have brought in their first-hand experience and expertise on disability issues. Some 500 representatives from disability organizations have been involved in the Ad Hoc Committee sessions.

This convention, once adopted, seeks to transform human society into a new community of stakeholders in disability rights, through the establishment of international legal standards. It would clarify the content of human rights principles and their application to persons with disabilities, provide an authoritative global reference point for domestic laws and policies, provide mechanisms for monitoring, establish a standard of assessment and achievement and provide a framework for international cooperation.

Furthermore, the work of the Committee in articulating the human rights of persons with disabilities as a “lived experience” in the lives of persons with disabilities could be an entry point for realization of a society that would value difference and respect the equality of all human beings, regardless of their “differences”.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that the goal of this convention is “*to provide a building block for the development of truly inclusive societies, in which the voices of all are heard, including persons with disabilities.*”

### **5.1 The Disability, Literacy and Development Link**

More than 130 million children are out of school and over 800 million adults are illiterate. A large portion of this illiterate population are also individuals with have various disabilities. We know that today more then 90% of all disabled children in Africa never come to school. For the part of the population that is older then 20 years of age this figure must be even more striking.

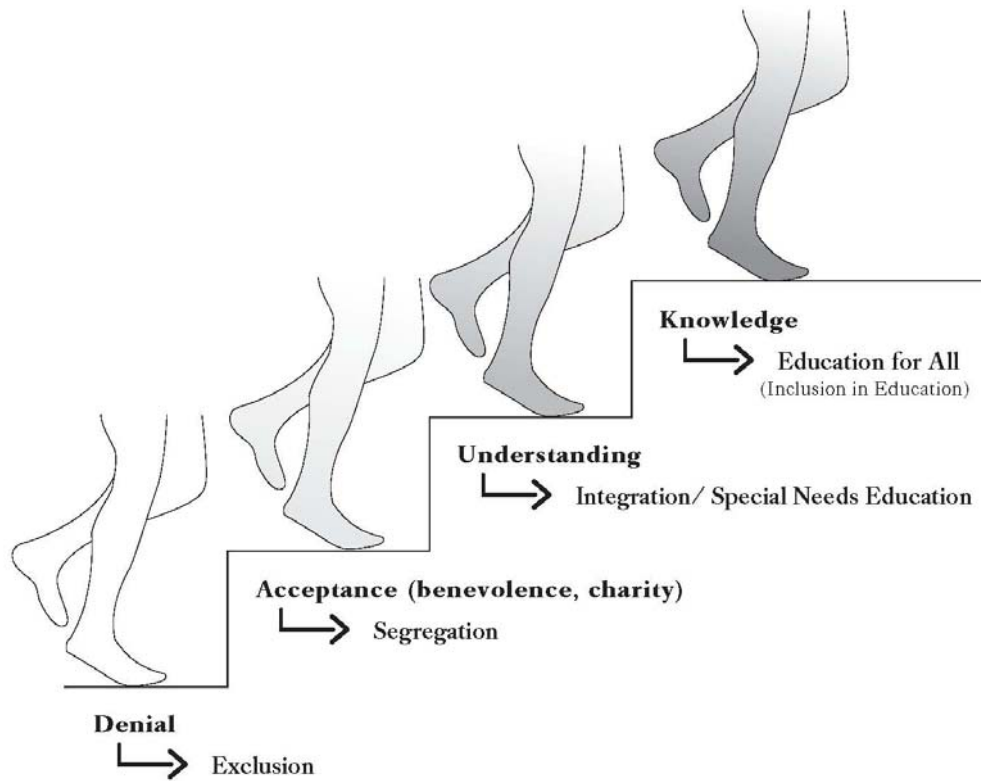
The World Bank, together with UNESCO and its partners recently called for strengthening global cooperation and partnerships to “unlock” opportunities for the more than 600 million disabled people worldwide, of whom 400 million live in developing countries. Mr Wolfensohn recently stated “If we are to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of halving poverty by 2015, dealing with education for all, halving the rates of birth and child mortality, it is simply impossible to conceive of doing that without the inclusion of the disabled community.”

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## ***Understanding the Process of Inclusion***

Ensuring the Right to Education for ALL



**Steps from Exclusion to Inclusion**

# The Rights Framework for Inclusion

