

Inclusive education represents fundamental reform in the global education system. For the first time, under United Nations leadership, education is seen as a right of all learners. It is only since the formation of the UN that education has been considered at the global level, and that action has been taken with regard to human rights. Polat and Kisanj (2009) and the global report, Better Education For All (2009), of Inclusion International provide synopses, with specific reference to disability, of UN level statements advocating universal access to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 laid out the general global and personal rights of citizens anywhere in our world. Article 26 dealt with securing basic education for all. The Universal Declaration was followed by the European Convention on Human Rights (1<sup>st</sup> Protocol, 1952) , the 1996 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the World Programme Action Concerning Disabled Persons (1982), the Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education For All, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education of 1994, the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), Millenium Development Goals (2000), the EFA Flagship The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities (2001), The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities: Toward Inclusion, and, most recently, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and its Article 24 on education.

This lengthy series of conventions, declarations, and similar statements indicate consistent concern by world level organizations with universal education as a human right. Concern that education begin at an early age characterized all these statements. It is obvious, given the World Programme for Action Concerning Disabled Persons, the

Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, the Salamanca Statement, the EFA Flagship The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities and, lastly, Article 24 of the recent Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion that disability that particular concern was directed to persons experiencing disabilities.

The early general thrust of UN policy and effort relative to disability and education may best be seen in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (pp. viii-ix, 2).

We believe and proclaim that:

- Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning
- Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs
- Education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs
- Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting their needs
- Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

The Salamanca Conference high-lighted the particular challenge of disability to the

education community while embedding disability and education in the larger concept of Education for All (EFA).

It was shortly before the Salamanca meeting that the term “inclusive education” was first used with regard to educating children experiencing disabilities. “In July 1988 a group of 14 people from North America who were concerned about the slow progress of integration barnstormed around a table at Frontier College, Toronto, Canada and came up with the concept of inclusion to describe better the process of placing children and adults with disabilities or learning difficulties in the mainstream” (Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). For some years those learners experiencing disabilities formed the single group to whom “inclusive education” was applied.

Usage of the term with this target group in mind sped quickly. The previous statements of positive UN policy noted earlier have reinforced the particular concern when education and disability is the issue. There is no doubt but that the nexus of education and disability is considered of major importance under EFA. The definition of inclusive education as it relates to disability, at a time when usage of the term has spread to cover a variety of other groups also denied access to the regular education system, is the point at issue in the present discussion.

As noted, though learners experiencing disabilities commonly were viewed as the bedrock of the inclusion discussion in earlier years, this perception has changed. The focus has shifted from the solitary group of those experiencing disability to the multiple group of all those excluded from education systems around the world. Examples are the girl child, the orphan child, the ethnic child, the working child, the impoverished child and so on. There is no doubt that this is in keeping with UN policy and responsibility

alluded to in the phrase Education for All. Booth (2005), Ainscow and Booth (2003), and others have described Inclusive Education as “concerned with over-coming barriers to participation that may be experienced by any pupil... It is a never-ending process...dependent on continuous pedagogical and organizational development within the mainstream. This view has been referred to in the literature as the “broad” view while focusing on the group experiencing disabilities has been nominated the “narrow” view.

To us, this shift from a single to a multiple group focus is salutary. Every child, under any group designation, has an equal and irrevocable right to education. As stated by UNESCO in the Open File (Miles, 2005), “Inclusion starts from the belief that the right to education is a basic human right and the foundation of a more just society”.

Nonetheless, the shift has deepened confusion already existing around the meaning of inclusive education. The confusion arises from a number of sources. As mentioned, at an earlier period the term was generally understood to apply to learners experiencing disabilities. A great many people and organizations, and even governments, particularly those governments with long-standing and sophisticated special education systems, continue to use the term to signify education the group of learners experiencing disabilities.

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