

## **Lisbon, Young people with disabilities talk about inclusive education: “We are the best experts about our own needs”**

78 young people from 29 European countries met in Lisbon on 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> September 2007 for the Hearing “YOUNG VOICES: Meeting Diversity in Education”. They had the opportunity to discuss their special educational needs due to visual or hearing impairments, mobility problems, learning difficulties, etc. All 78 young participants (16 to 25 years old) were disabled in some way.

After a full day on Sunday dedicated to debates and discussions in small groups focussing upon vocational education schools, secondary schools and higher education, the young delegates presented their views, experiences and ideas in the Portuguese Parliament (*Assembleia da Republica*) in front of national and European VIPs and decision-makers.

Participants are in favour of inclusive education if some conditions are met, mainly accessibility, special training for teachers and changing attitudes.

**Accessibility** is very important: not only buildings and schools but also public transport, communication (e.g. sign language), access to information and of course accessible and adapted technology. Tamara, from Austria and a wheelchair user, recalled: “My school was totally adapted, but no accessible transport was available to go there. I was totally dependant for transportation”.

Many participants wanted to emphasize the **role of their teachers**. Marina, from Latvia and visually impaired is in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of higher education: “Teachers tried to discourage me, saying I could not succeed in my higher studies. One year later, they changed their attitudes and they are thanking me for being with them and they are giving me help”. Lucy, from Belgium who is blind: “Almost all teachers I met were and are really helpful but I am convinced the way you behave yourself influences a lot the way your teachers or classmates will help you”. “Yes”, said Jessica, also from Belgium and also blind: “ but when I was 13 I was taught how to drive a car, and it was in a foreign language! Was that really meaningful for me?” This highlights a main conclusion: teachers are sometimes, but not always prepared and informed about the special needs of disabled students.

As said by one of the group “Inclusive Education can be the most wonderful or the most horrible experience at the same time”. That is why a participant concluded: “We are in favour of inclusive education as long as the necessary support, trained teachers etc. are available. If this is not possible, then special education is still necessary”.

And what about **attitudes**? “We must say,” concluded the participants, “that teachers, the other pupils, the other parents might have negative attitudes against us and we need to have the energy to fight for our rights”. Cedric, from France, who is totally paralysed and wheelchair user: “Once in my university, I understood that many of my classmates had not met any disabled person before me. I must say that I had to do the first step, I had to go towards them”.

Participants and observers will never forget what all the young delegates expressed with such strong and positive commitment: “If you fight for something, you could lose, said Susana from Spain, “but if you do not fight, you have already lost”.

Freya, a severely disabled young lady from Iceland, presented what could be a general message for and from all the young delegates: “We are the best experts about our needs but

we have to remove barriers inside ourselves. Never forget we have more abilities than disabilities. If you want to be first class, you have to behave first class.”

The conclusion of one working group presented by Blandine, a severely disabled young lady from France, could be a message for all the decision makers at the event: **“What is good for us is good for all”**.

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**That European Hearing was organised by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education within the framework of Portugal 2007 – Presidency of the European Union.**

Many high level representatives were present: H.E. Dr Jaime Gama, President of the Assembleia da República, H.E. Minister of Education Dr. Ma. de Lurdes Rodrigues, Secretary of State for Education Dr. Valter Lemos, Deputy Secretary of State for Education Dr Jorge Pedreira, and Deputy Secretary of State for Rehabilitation Dr. Idalia Moniz. Officials from the Ministries of Education from some European countries and from European Commission and UNESCO were also present as well Ms Maruja Gutierrez, personal representative of Ján Figel, Member of the European Commission responsible for Education, Training, Culture and Youth and Mr. Pál Schmitt Hungarian Member of the European Parliament. Communication was facilitated by translation into 16 different languages as well as sign language interpretation.

Around three young people from each of the participating countries had been selected to go to Portugal. **Participating countries were:** Portugal, Austria, Belgium (Vlaanderen and Wallonie/Bruxelles), Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

Each participant received a bronze medal specially designed for the Portuguese Ministry of Education and the City of Lisbon to commemorate the Hearing.

<http://www.eu2007.min-edu.pt/np4/en/26.html>

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