

Young Voices

Meeting Diversity in Education



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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

This report is a summary of the presentations and results of the European Hearing of Young People with Special Educational Needs '*Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Special Needs Education*', organised by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education in co-operation with the Portuguese Ministry of Education. This event took place in Lisbon, in September 2007, within the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union.

This report has been prepared by the Agency on the basis of the contributions from the young delegates who participated in the event. The most sincere gratitude is expressed to all of them.

More comprehensive Internet based information relating to this event can be found on the Agency web site: www.european-agency.org/european-hearing2007

Editors: Victoria Soriano, Mary Kyriazopoulou, Harald Weber and Axelle Grünberger (Staff Members) European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

Extracts from the document are permitted provided that a clear reference to the source is given.

The report is available in fully manipulable electronic formats and in 21 languages in order to provide better access to the information. Electronic versions of this report are available on the Agency's website:

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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

Secretariat
Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000 Odense C Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office
3 Avenue Palmerston
BE-1000 Brussels Belgium
Tel: +32 2 280 33 59
brussels.office@european-agency.org

www.european-agency.org



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Foreword

The member countries of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) agreed to organise in 2007 a European Hearing, inviting young people with special educational needs to reflect upon and discuss their education and their future. Special emphasis was placed upon the young people's experiences, ideas and proposals regarding inclusive education.

This was the second time that the Agency organised such an important event. The first European Hearing for Young People with Special Educational Needs took place at the European Parliament, Brussels in 2003.

All member countries of the Agency were aware that organising such an event was a significant challenge, particularly considering that the anticipated number of participants from the 29 countries represented at the event (in 2003, 22 countries had taken part).

The 2007 Hearing took place in Lisbon, in September 2007. It was organised in co-operation with the Portuguese Ministry of Education within the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union.

For the Agency it has been a pleasure and honour to organise this second European Hearing. We would especially like to thank the 78 young delegates, as well as their families, teachers and support staff, the Ministries of education, the representatives from the European and international organisations and finally all of the Portuguese authorities for their participation and commitment. Without all of them, it would not have been possible to realise this important event.

Jørgen Greve
Chairman

Cor J. W. Meijer
Director





Introduction

During 2006, the Agency representatives were requested to nominate from their respective countries two or three educational settings – schools or classes – to take part in the Hearing ‘Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education’. The preferred representation of schools was one secondary school, one vocational school and one higher education institution.

The students from the nominated schools or classes were invited to reflect with their fellow students upon the results presented by the participants during the first European Hearing that took place in Brussels during 2003, as well as to reflect upon and discuss with their classmates the following three questions:

1. Can you describe the **main improvements and the main challenges concerning your education** that you wish to discuss and share with your European colleagues? Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for improvement?
2. What are **your views/opinions regarding inclusive education**? Are there any benefits, challenges and/or barriers you want to highlight? Do you want to mention and/or suggest any recommendations?
3. You might have clear expectations regarding your future education, work and life. Can you describe the **main barriers** that in your opinion will need **to be removed in order for you to achieve your expectations**?

Each participating school, or class was requested to appoint one young delegate to participate in the event. On the day before the Hearing all delegates met, shared their opinions and discussed the three questions in working groups that were formed according to their respective level of education: secondary, vocational or higher. All the young delegates were well prepared in advance of the Hearing. The discussions demonstrated a serious and open exchange of ideas along with a genuine respect for everyone’s opinions.

It is important to highlight that the nominated delegates presented a very broad range of different special needs and disabilities. The majority were educated within mainstream educational settings.



The results of the young people's discussions were presented at the Portuguese Parliament and constitute the basis of the Lisbon Declaration 'Young People's Views on Inclusive Education', is presented in full at the end of this report and also accompanies this documents as a separate flyer.

This summary report presents extracts of the presentations given by the Portuguese Minister of Education and the Secretary of State for Education during the opening and closing sessions respectively. They highlight the commitment to and support for inclusive education on the behalf of the Portuguese educational authorities.

Whilst the Lisbon Declaration summarises the common issues highlighted and agreements shared by all the young delegates, this report presents the key issues raised by young delegates that are specifically related to the three educational levels represented in the Hearing, namely secondary, vocational and higher education.



Extract from the presentation given by Ms. Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues, Portuguese Minister of Education

During the opening Session of the European Hearing in the Portuguese Parliament ‘Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education’, the Minister for Education Ms. Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues said that:

‘It is an honour and a great joy to host the young people from 29 countries – 26 from the European Union plus 3 other countries that have joined this initiative – which aims at improving the implementation of inclusive education in each school of every country in the European Union. Congratulations upon your participation in this initiative; for the great success it represents for you as well as for the countries you represent; and certainly for a more inclusive Europe.

The principles for inclusive education for all children and young people with special needs were established in 1994 in Salamanca, as a result of many years of work and debate by experts all over the world. The development and implementation of inclusive education are the everyday work of all teachers, staff and experts. Work is focused on the identification of obstacles, barriers, prejudices, technical, social and economic difficulties, but also focused on the search for solutions that may improve inclusion.

Inclusive education is a process in constant evolution that is never finished, since the targets and objectives of inclusive education are always changing. This pressure is a result not only of the urgency of new social demands and expectations, but also of developments in knowledge and technology being made available.

I think that every country in the European Union, in spite of the diversity of starting points, faces common challenges in three areas: firstly, the constant effort in training teachers and support staff in working with young students with special needs. Secondly, the improvement of the physical and material conditions of schools that embrace students with special needs. Thirdly, the development of teaching tools as well as pedagogical content and materials alongside applying the potential of technology.



Today, information and communication technologies offer possibilities to access information and knowledge that were previously unprecedented and this potential needs to be explored and developed with the support of every government.

This initiative that brings us together is unique because it involves the students with special needs in the development of their own inclusive education; it gives voice and expands the debate and awareness to find solutions, considering the expectations and visions of the young people themselves.

With your [the young delegates'] contribution, we will certainly improve the learning conditions of European young people with special needs. This makes the initiative so innovative. Congratulations once more on your participation and commitment – for the example that you set and for the success that each of you will achieve. Your success is ours as well. It is the success of every student, in particular those with special needs, that justify your work here. I hope that your dreams come true. I also hope that your activities today go well and that your contributions help us to improve our task. Thank you very much.'



Reflections from the Young Delegates

During the plenary session at the Portuguese Parliament, the young delegates reported on the common issues they had discussed in their respective education level groups the day before to all participants of the Hearing.

The text below presents these issues in more detail. They are presented here in the same order as the questions the young delegates debated with their fellow students in advance of the Hearing:

- The main **improvements** and **challenges** concerning their education;
- Their views and opinions regarding **inclusive education**;
- The main barriers to be removed in order to achieve their **future** expectations.

It is important to highlight that delegates all agreed upon the fact that the results and challenges presented during the 2003 European Hearing were still valuable, although improvements could be identified.

Direct quotes from some of the young delegates are inserted in the text below in order to better illustrate strongly expressed ideas arising within the working group discussions.

Reflections from Delegates in Secondary Education

Most of the delegates from secondary education were from inclusive settings in mainstream education.

Within the group discussions, the young delegates from secondary education expressed their overall satisfaction with their education and generally agreed that **improvements** have taken place during their educational careers.



The overall accessibility of education was highlighted as one of the main continuing **challenges**: this covers the physical accessibility of buildings, but also the fact that learning materials and tools are not always user-friendly, or accessible to all types of special needs. Karin observed that: ‘modern schools are still not fully accessible to different types of disability, such as visual impairment.’

Support materials, such as computers, digital cameras, microphones, etc, are of great importance. However, it is the case that often either the necessary equipment is not available at all, or not in enough quantity. At times, young people and their families do not know how to get access to this equipment.

Accessible education also refers to the availability of assistants or support staff. A remaining problem is that in some cases, when help is required, young people’s classmates are the only people available to provide the required support.

Young delegates insisted that teachers’ attitudes play an essential role. Teachers should pay attention to all their pupils’ specific needs. ‘Teachers should keep in mind that there are different people in the class, with different needs and different ways of learning’ suggested Simone. However, the support given by teachers should not mean pupils with special needs are patronised. Teachers need to be

trained in order to understand and know more about special needs.



Inclusive education was discussed as a positive opportunity and relevant issue for them.

An important encouraging aspect highlighted by the young people in secondary education was that inclusion brings different people together and improves all pupils' social skills. It is of mutual benefit for all pupils. Inclusive education is also overall more (positively) challenging than special education; as Márton pointed out 'inclusive education is very effective because you face problems and you learn how to solve them.'

However, clear difficulties related to inclusive education were also raised. Aude summed this up by saying 'inclusive education has been both the most horrible and the most beautiful challenge I had to face.' Although inclusion supports social contacts outside school, there might be some difficulties occurring at school in the interaction between pupils with and pupils without special needs. 'Inclusive education is the best option, but still many schools do not have the resources and the staff for that' Alfred said.

In addition, mainstream teachers who are not well prepared, or who do not have clear information about students' needs, as well as the lack of adequate resources in mainstream secondary schools create barriers for pupils with special needs.



The young delegates concluded that inclusive education is good as far as all necessary support is available and that learning takes place under optimal conditions.

They also agreed that education should have the role of preparing them to live in the real world. As Anna Maria and Christopher suggested 'education is about learning that you can make things you did not expect you would do.' Delegates asked to always have the freedom and right to make the choice of being included in a mainstream school or not.

Regarding their **future**, most young delegates in secondary education expressed the wish to keep studying and to go to university. However, they were concerned about having a genuine free choice for their studies: they did not want to be offered limited possibilities as a result to their needs, the lack of support, or of accessibility in higher education. Some worries were raised regarding other people's prejudices in higher education as well as in the employment sector.

Finally, delegates from secondary education clearly stated the need for them to own the decisions about their future life. This means not being separated from the rest of the society, but instead having the same opportunities as the others.

Reflections from Delegates in Vocational Education

The majority of delegates from vocational education were integrated in mainstream provision. A few of them attended both mainstream and special settings, with only a few being educated in special settings. It is also relevant to highlight that in this group of delegates, there was a broader range of needs represented than in the other two groups.



As a principle, young delegates in this group were very clear in insisting that their rights are not always considered and respected, as they deserve. They also asked not to be treated better in a 'protective way' because of their disability. Fabien, Séverine and Fabio were very firm 'we feel like everybody else, but sometimes we need support, unfortunately ... We need to be trusted and respected. We don't want to be treated as disabled.' Mitja said 'we have to accept each other no matter how we look, what we know, what we can do or cannot do. Our society will become more equal.'

Although they expressed a generally positive feeling regarding their schools and teachers, they raised some main concerns regarding the **improvements** that have still to be made. Some of the delegates have had difficult experiences in order to obtain the support they require. At times teachers are not well informed, not interested enough in knowing their needs, or sometimes support is not available for what they need. 'Teachers must explain lessons in a lot of different ways so that all students can understand' said Iro and Vassilis.

During the discussions it became very evident that for them that high quality support cannot be provided if differences are not really taken into consideration.



Amy said ‘young people need to have the choice to learn at their own pace, so they find it enjoyable and have a fulfilling experience from their education.’

Accessibility related to public transport, or access to buildings was very much an issue for delegates and highlighted as an important **challenge**.

All delegates in mainstream provision were very much in favour of **inclusive education**. ‘In mainstream schools we learn subjects at a high level. This prepares us for our future and work in a hearing world’ Steven said. A few delegates in special settings were also very much in favour of inclusion as the best option, but a small number of delegates preferred to be in a more protected environment. The unanimous agreement related to having free choice regarding placement in an educational setting: with no imposition, the full respect of personal situations and with as many options as possible being available.

The delegates expressed their wish for their **future** as being to live independently as far as possible. They all wished to pursue their studies and they were all very much concerned about their future work possibilities. Delegates suggested they are not in an equal situation compared with their non-disabled peers.

Finally, delegates were confident about their capacities and clear about their wishes, but unsure about the recognition of their real potential by schools and society in general.

Reflections from Delegates in Higher Education

It should be mentioned here that in the higher education group a significant number of delegates had visual impairment in comparison to the other two levels of education. This is the reason why the issues referred to by this group often specifically refer to this area of disability.

Delegates reported **improvements** concerning access to information – through computer and Internet technology – for blind or visually impaired students. Digital books as well as audio books are made available to them. Other delegates reported awareness regarding

disability as an improvement. For example, mobility and accessibility are becoming more and more a topic of public discussion and debate. The availability of assistants and support from volunteers or friends were also reported as positive developments.



Several **challenges** were also highlighted, which were very much related to the above-mentioned improvements. At times, access to information can be limited or dependant upon many different conditions. For example, the slow delivery of new computers, limited availability of digital or audio books and – with regards to the Internet – new browsers, are often not accessible for blind users.

Although many documents used at universities are produced there and universities can sometimes facilitate the production of materials required by visually impaired students, too few documents are available. As Maarja stated ‘general subjects that need reading books cause problems. This is the problem that followed me through school, because there were never enough Braille or audio books.’

Another issue raised concerned the limited free choice of studies, due to the accessibility of buildings, unavailable support or insufficient technology. This issue was well summarised by Gabriela ‘people with disabilities have to choose a school based on accessibility of the school buildings and not what they want ... We want to be able to choose what we want and not what is possible.’



Delegates reported they often have to take the initiative in order to support the institution they attend, as their peer, teachers and school or university administration staff do not always know how to support them.

Challenges were also reported regarding delegates' future job opportunities. Employers' attitudes as well as inaccessible buildings can create barriers to entering into the labour market on equal terms.

With regards to recommendations, better-informed teachers as well as expert support staff were pointed out. Additional resources, meeting facilities for students with disabilities, the use of accessible language during lessons, smaller classes and the provision of supplementary teachers were considered as important areas for improvement. 'Disabilities are very different. Individual needs are important, not general needs' Diana said.

Delegates agreed that **inclusive education** prepares them in the best way for their life. Some of the delegates, entering higher education meant attending a mainstream setting for the first time. Inclusive education was referred to as the first step towards being integrated into society.

The change of special schools into competence centres was also discussed. The combination of inclusive education with individual specialised support was considered the best preparation for higher education. All delegates agreed that having the opportunity to participate in inclusive education from the very beginning of their education makes them stronger, more self-confident and independent.

Regarding their **future**, emphasis was placed upon the barriers faced as a result of negative attitudes and ignorance. Shifting attitudes towards a non-deficit oriented view that is focussed upon abilities, potential and strengths requires a lot of energy and patience. Delegates proposed to make the first step themselves, although this needs more courage and stamina than required of other students. Kaisu concluded 'it is good to know the world ahead, although it might be tough.'



Extract from the presentation given by Mr. Valter Lemos, Portuguese Secretary of State for Education

In the closing session of the European Hearing, Mr. Valter Lemos, Secretary of State for Education, said these words:

‘I wish to address the young people present here to congratulate them for the enthusiastic way they have worked today. Truly, I believe that the youngsters that have spoken today in the Portuguese Parliament have given a remarkable contribution to the pursuit of real inclusive schooling all over Europe.

Naturally, we all know that there will be no true democracy unless we achieve a school for all and I believe that the contribution that each of you has provided in your work today will make history and will show the way not only to fulfilling the objectives of inclusion, but also to the means of doing it. We all owe you for the work you have done.

I wish to address the politicians and the decision makers who will consider the follow up and consequences of the work done by you today. We, politicians and decision makers, have asked you to state your views and we have had the opportunity to listen to you. We have now the responsibility to make happen what you have proposed.

As a consequence, I wish to promise that this work will be carried on. The European Union Presidency, in collaboration with the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, is committed to presenting a document that will summarise the experiences and recommendations presented today, in a way that will be used as a reference in the near future. We hope that the recommendations approved on this the 17th September 2007 at the Portuguese Parliament in Lisbon, will be a framework for the pursuit of true inclusive schooling.

For us, it has been a privilege to have you working here in Portugal for these two days and we will remember this work as a step towards a school for all – a truly democratic school. Good luck to you all.’



The Lisbon Declaration

All the central issues raised by the young delegates have been used as the basis for the main result of this event: the Lisbon Declaration ‘Young People’s Views on Inclusive Education’.

The Declaration presents the common issues expressed by all the young delegates. It clearly highlights their right to be respected, to have the same opportunities as their peers and to be involved in any decision-making that concerns them.

The Declaration also highlights their opinions regarding the benefits inclusive education can provide: it is mutually beneficial to all pupils/students with and without special educational needs; it allows the acquisition of more social skills; it is the best option so far as the necessary conditions to ensure its success are available.

The Declaration also highlights improvements that still need to be made regarding mobility and full access to education. This is only possible if the different needs of different people are taken into consideration.

The Lisbon Declaration provides a unique contribution to debates on inclusive education as it presents the collective views of young people with disabilities themselves. It is hoped that the very clear messages from the young people presented in the Declaration – as well as this document – will provide educational policy makers and practitioners inspiration for their future work.

The full text of the Declaration is presented below and also accompanies this document as a separate flyer.

Young People’s Views on Inclusive Education

On the 17th of September 2007, within the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union, the Portuguese Ministry of Education organised together with the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education a European Hearing: ‘Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education’.



The proposals agreed upon by young people with special educational needs from 29 countries¹, attending secondary, vocational and higher education have resulted in the Lisbon Declaration 'Young People's Views on Inclusive Education'. This Declaration covers what the young people presented in Lisbon in the plenary session at the Assembleia da República concerning their rights, needs, challenges and recommendations in order to achieve successful inclusive education.

The Declaration is within the scope of previous official European and International documents in the field of special needs education such as: the 'Council Resolution concerning integration of children and young people with disabilities into ordinary systems of education' (EC, 1990); the 'Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education' (UNESCO, 1994); the 'Charter of Luxembourg' (Helios programme, 1996); the 'Council Resolution on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training' (EC, 2003); the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' (United Nations, 2006).

The Young People agreed on their RIGHTS:

- We have the right to be respected and not to be discriminated against. We do not want sympathy; we want to be respected as future adults who will have to live and work in a normal environment.
- We have the right to the same opportunities as everyone else, but with the necessary support to meet our needs. No one's needs should be ignored.
- We have the right to make our own decisions and choices. Our voice needs to be heard.
- We have the right to live independently. We also want to have a family and we want to have a house adapted to our needs. Many of us want to have the possibility to study at a university. We also want to work and we do not want to be separated from other people without disabilities.
- Everyone in society needs to be aware of, understand and respect our rights.

¹ Austria, Belgium (Flemish and French Speaking Communities), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom.



The Young People expressed clear views on the main IMPROVEMENTS they have experienced in their education:

- Generally we have received satisfactory support in our education, but more progress needs to be made.
- The accessibility of buildings is improving. Mobility issues and the accessibility of the built environment are more and more a topic of discussion and debate.
- Disability is becoming more visible in society.
- Computer technology is improving and well-structured digital books are available.

The Young People highlighted CHALLENGES and NEEDS:

- Accessibility needs are different for different people. There are different accessibility barriers in education and in society for people with different special needs, for example:
 - During lessons and exams some of us need more time;
 - Sometimes we need personal assistants in our classes;
 - We need to have access to adapted materials at the same time as our classmates.
- Free choice of study topics is sometimes limited by accessibility of buildings, insufficient technology and accessibility of materials (equipment, books).
- We need subjects and skills that are meaningful for us and for our future life.
- We need good counselling throughout our school education regarding what is possible for us to do in the future based upon our individual needs.
- There is still a lack of knowledge about disability. Teachers, other pupils and some parents sometimes have a negative attitude towards us. Non-disabled people should know that they can ask a disabled person her/himself whether help is needed or not.

The Young People expressed their views on INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:

- It is very important to give everyone the freedom to choose where they want to be educated.
- Inclusive education is best if the conditions are right for us. This means the necessary support, resources and trained teachers should be available. Teachers need to be motivated, to be well informed about and understand our needs. They need to be well trained, ask



us what we need and to be well co-ordinated among themselves during all the school years.

- We see a lot of benefits in inclusive education: we acquire more social skills; we live wider experiences; we learn about how to manage in the real world; we need to have and interact with friends with and without special needs.

- Inclusive education with individualised, specialised support is the best preparation for higher education. Specialised centres would be of help to support us and to inform universities properly about the help we require.

- Inclusive education is mutually beneficial to us and to everyone.

The Young People CONCLUDED:

We are the ones to build our future. We need to remove barriers inside ourselves and inside other people without disabilities. We have to grow beyond our disability – then the world will accept us in a better way.

Lisbon, September 2007

Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education presents the results of the European Hearing of Young People with Special Educational Needs organised by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, in co-operation with the Portuguese Ministry of Education.

The event took place in Lisbon, the 17th of September 2007 within the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union.

This report has been prepared by the Agency on the basis of the contributions from the young delegates.

The Lisbon Declaration 'Young People's Views on Inclusive Education' is the main result of this event. The full text of the Declaration is presented in full in this report and also accompanies this document as a separate flyer.