*Day of General Discussion on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*

*Geneva, April 15, 2015*

***Interactive panel on Non-exclusion on the basis of disability, reasonable accommodation***

***and access to inclusive education systems***

**Comments by Diane Richler**

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Inclusion International is a network of over 200 family-based organizations with national members in 115 countries, working to promote the social, cultural, economic and political rights of people with intellectual disabilities. Many of our member organizations at the local level were started by parents who were frustrated that their sons and daughters were excluded from school, and so families created the first schools to educate children who have an intellectual disability. These schools taught the families two things. First, that in fact their sons and daughters were capable of learning. And second, that being educated apart from their non-disabled peers prepared them for a life of segregation – not knowing others in the community or being known by them and not prepared to participate in and contribute to the life of their communities as highlighted in paragraph (m) of the Preamble of the CRPD.

Adopting a human rights framework for our work helped us to understand that exclusion from regular education was an infringement of the right to fully participate in the community. As some schools and education systems began to include students with intellectual disabilities we learned an important lesson – inclusive schools were better for the students with disabilities, and at the same time, were better for ALL students. It is better for all children because learning together teaches students to value diversity, builds social capital and lays the foundation for inclusive communities. The elements that make inclusion successful – a whole school approach that respects multiple intelligence, practices differentiated instruction, uses a universal design for learning and fosters collaboration and provides support to teachers – help raise the quality of education for all students.

As we learned from research and from our members, inclusion requires some reasonable accommodation, defined in the CRPD as necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments. We need clarification from the Committee on what reasonable accommodation means. But simply thinking of inclusive education as requiring accommodation misses the key opportunity presented by a commitment to inclusion – that is a radical transformation of the education system.

We need to learn lessons from other success stories. The message from the journalists who broke the story of the Watergate scandal in the United States in the 1970s was “Follow the money”. If we look at how money is being spent to support students with disabilities, all too often we discover that more is being spent on supporting a few students in special programs rather than in making the system better for all. And a disproportionate amount is spent on assessment rather than on teaching and learning. The more special programs are created for particular groups of students with special educational needs, the fewer resources there are to transform and strengthen the regular system. And as long as special programs exist, systems will find students to fill them.

Governments cannot afford to fund two systems – one segregated and another inclusive; the only way they will afford inclusion is by committing to phase out segregated systems and to invest in transformation that will support inclusion – through ensuring one ministry is responsible for the education of all students, training teachers on inclusive pedagogical approaches, and revising legislation, policy and fiscal arrangements to support inclusion. The Global Monitoring Report on Education for All released last week demonstrates that many countries are waffling on their commitment to inclusion. They espouse a commitment to inclusion while still supporting segregated and outdated models. We need the CRPD Committee to be very clear in a general comment that the CRPD requires a transformation of education systems to make schools inclusive and provide a better education for all students.

We know this is not an easy task. Often it is easier to build inclusive education systems in places where there is not already an entrenched special education system, and the more developed the special system, the more difficult it is to dismantle. That is why it is crucial that investments in international cooperation support the development of inclusive systems rather than developing special programs that will need to be dismantled later. In countries where people have not had the benefit of seeing inclusion in action it is imperative to develop examples that can inspire others. And start young. When children with disabilities are included in regular early childhood education programs their parents are loathe to see them go into separate programs later.

It is the right of all children to learn about their neighbours, and no parent should have to argue in favour of inclusion as I heard one mother do explaining that inclusion was good for both of her sons, one who had a disability and one who didn’t. She recounted how the first time she met a person with a disability was when her son was born. Don’t parents of the future deserve to grow up learning about disability as a natural part of the human condition? Inclusive education is a right for children who have a disability, but also a right of all students.

We have witnessed a growing support for inclusive education. Within Inclusion International we have seen an evolution in thinking among our members. When negotiations of the CRPD began, many of our members were still afraid that inclusion couldn’t work and wanted to offer choice to families. Gradually the balance has shifted and there is now almost unanimous support for inclusion, and a recognition that supposedly giving families a choice is not a real option, since continuing to support the special system deprives the regular system of the resources it needs to provide quality inclusion. Having a separate system where teachers can send any child who poses a challenge allows the regular system to abdicate the responsibility to serve all children, and acts as a magnet drawing in new students. I believe that other stakeholders are evolving their positions in the same way. The Committee can speed up this evolution by highlighting it in its General Comment.

Inclusive education provides a better system for educating all children. It provides better academic outcomes for all children, and fosters and promotes social inclusion of other marginalized groups as well – such as ethnic minorities, child labourers, and girls. Moreover, inclusion helps build social cohesion and social capital that have a lasting impact in the lives of individuals and in communities.

I became passionate about the benefits of inclusive education when I visited inclusive classrooms in Canada and around the world and decided that they offered the kind of education I wanted for my own children who didn’t have a disability because these classes were dynamic, energizing and welcoming. Then I saw the benefits for my godson who has autism and who was included in regular classes from pre-school through high school, and who despite having limited speech learned to sign, to use alternate forms of communication, and made lifelong friends.

Article 24 of the CRPD, more than any other article, has the power to shape the future citizens of the world and create societies which live up to the aspirations of the drafters of the Convention. We count on the Committee to unleash that power in its General Comment.

Thank-you.