

## The 10th Gordon C. Cardona Memorial Lecture

### The State of Inclusive Education Today

Panel discussion chaired by Dr Vickie Gauci with Dr Louis Camilleri and Dr Francois Mifsud from the Department of Inclusion and Access to Learning (Faculty of Education), Ms Karen Buttigieg, Vice President of the National Parents' Society for Persons with Disability (NPSPD) and Mr Jacob Callus, Chair of the ENGAGE Committee.

Inclusion is essential to education. Learning is about diversity, whether it is different subjects, learning about different cultures, and so on. It is not an optional extra. Including disabled students should not be seen as a philanthropic commitment. It is a right.

Society is diverse and education should reflect that. It should also prepare children to live in a diverse society. Without inclusion in education, we cannot have an inclusive society. Education needs to be diverse and to cater for students' diversity.

We need inclusion because education is for all. A good quality education is a right for everyone, regardless of who they are. The education system needs to be rooted in inclusion and diversity, to cater for different needs.

Embracing diversity is also about being humble enough to acknowledge that there are other perspectives that need to be considered which are different from our own. Classrooms are a safe space where to encounter diversity and learning how to live with and respond to it. Having diversity in the classroom helps overcome fear of those who do not fit into cultural norms.

Rigidity is the enemy of inclusion – rigidity of curricula, syllabi, exams. Standardisation entrenches rigidity and undermines inclusion. What is needed is flexibility. But inclusive education is still made to fit into pre-existing educational structures.

The education system does not allow for different types of learning, different interests and talents. Nor does it promote self-determination. This creates problems for all children, but even more so for those who do not fit into the education system.

The LSE should not be expected to have the entire responsibility for the student with disability. That can lead to integration rather than inclusion. The teacher should still have responsibility for the student's education. It would be much better for different types of educators to work together and collaborate.

The classroom should be seen as a community of learners and therefore as belonging to the students, not the educators. This perspective emphasises the classroom as a community and all students as belonging to that community. Therefore, taking children out of a classroom – for example to receive segregated services – undermines that community. Or worse, children ending up not attending school at all.

We need to move away from an expert model of education, in both research and practice, towards a distributive model. There needs to be dialogue and understanding on all parts – children and students, parents, educators. We need to value different perspectives and find a middle ground. There are different types of expertise and experiential knowledge.

Children whose behaviour is seen as challenging are taken out to receive services which purportedly are there to support the children. But in reality, what is happening is that these children's behaviour is seen as a disruption which needs to be removed.

Resource centres are not functioning as resources centres but as special schools. However many changes are made, the mentality remains the same and attitudes towards children with disability remain based in charity. The epitome of this attitude is the prize for kindness which is often given to a non-disabled child who is a friend of a disabled child.

We cannot assume to know what others need. The charity model is oppressive and takes the voice away from children. Instead, the education system should be promoting children's voice, including those who need AAC to speak. The charity model has even penetrated into the system deciding the support, giving the impression that having an LSE will solve all the problems. This system also has the disadvantage of shifting responsibility away from the teacher for any child who has some kind of difficulty in learning.

The inclusive education system has failed because the changes made did not transform the system. The attitude towards disabled children remains one of them. They are not being seen as an integral part of the classroom, the school and the mainstream education system.

It is okay for disabled children not to be in school – during exams, because of disruptive behaviour and other reasons. Therefore, they are still not seen as having the same rights as other children.