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Editorial: the Salamanca Statement: 25 years on

Mel Ainscow^a, Roger Slee^b and Marnie Best^b

^aCentre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester, School of Environment, Education and Development, Manchester, UK; ^bDivision of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, School of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide, UK

ABSTRACT

June 2019 saw the 25th anniversary of the World Conference on Special Needs Education, which was co-organized by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education and Science of Spain, and held in the city of Salamanca. It led to the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, arguably the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education. In so doing, it endorsed the idea of inclusive education, which was to become a major influence in subsequent years. The articles in this special issue illustrate the ways in which the Salamanca Statement has and still is influencing the development of policies and practices across the world. In this editorial, we provide readers with some relevant background to these developments.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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The legacy of Salamanca

Although the immediate focus of the Salamanca conference was on what was termed special needs education, its conclusion was that:

Special needs education – an issue of equal concern to countries of the North and of the South – cannot advance in isolation. It has to form part of an overall educational strategy and, indeed, of new social and economic policies. It calls for major reform of the ordinary school. (UNESCO 1994, iii–iv)

The aim, then, is to develop inclusive education systems. This can only happen, it is argued, if mainstream schools become capable of educating all children in their local communities.

In a widely quoted section, the Salamanca Statement concluded that:

Regular schools with [an] 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 to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (ix)

As this key passage indicates, the move towards inclusive schools can be justified on a number of grounds. There is:

- **an educational justification:** the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and that therefore benefit all children;
- **a social justification:** inclusive schools are able to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together, and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society; and
- **an economic justification:** it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of school specializing in different groups of children.

The publication of the Salamanca Statement suggested a significant change in policy direction, not least for the education of disabled students. However, the document contains some ambiguities that have become apparent when used in the field. In particular, the deficit orientation of special education discourse continues to undermine more radical moves, as argued in some of the papers. Indeed, this conservative discourse has protected resistance to the reforms it foreshadowed.

Despite these difficulties, subsequent years have seen considerable efforts in many countries to move educational policy and practice in a more inclusive direction. This was reinforced in 2008, by the UNESCO International Conference on Education, which focused on *Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future* (Operti, Walker, and Zhang 2014). During this event, ministers, government officials and representatives of organizations discussed the importance of broadening the concept of inclusion to reach all children, under the assumption that *every learner matters equally* and has the right to receive effective educational opportunities.

Meanwhile, further impetus for the inclusion agenda was provided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), specifically Article 24 which points to ‘the right of persons with disabilities to education’ and the right to ‘an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning’ (16).

Reflecting on progress, a Global Monitoring Report points out that, despite improvements, there are still 58 million children out of school globally and around 100 million children who do not complete primary education (UNESCO 2015). The report goes on to conclude that inequality in education has increased, with the poorest and most disadvantaged shouldering the heaviest burden.

The year 2016 was particularly important in relation to the Salamanca legacy. Building on the Incheon Declaration agreed at the World Forum on Education in May 2015, it saw the publication of the *Education 2030 Framework for Action*. This emphasizes inclusion and equity as laying the foundations for quality education. It also stresses the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation, and learning processes and outcomes. In this way, it is made clear that the international policy agenda of Education for All (UNESCO 1990) really has to be about ‘all’.

This focus on all children is further emphasized in the *UNESCO Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* (2017), which argues that the central message is simple: ‘every learner matters and matters equally’. The complexities arise, of course, when this thinking is put into practice, as evidenced by the papers in this special issue.

The experience of Salamanca

More than 300 participants took part in the Salamanca conference, representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations. The aim was to further the objective of the Education for All policy by considering the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education.

One of us attended the conference and recalls the sense of enthusiasm that was generated by the discussions that took place. He also recalls the splendid social programme organised each evening for the delegates, with banquets, receptions and lots of splendid Spanish wine. The wonderfully inclusive atmosphere that this created led him to think that by the end of the week those involved would ‘sign anything’.

Moving on more seriously, it is interesting to hear more recent reflections of some of the others who took part in the conference, including certain key players. Most significant of these is Lena Saleh who, at the time, was head of the section of special educational needs at UNESCO. She was the key person in setting up the conference and drawing together partners in order to make it happen. For many, she was also an inspirational figure, whose global influence was crucial in bringing together key stakeholders, within UNESCO and internationally.

Writing 20 years after the conference, Lena stated:

The Salamanca Declaration certainly opened the door and gave an impetus for change. It had a world-wide impact What is needed now is to revise the thinking of Salamanca so that it fits a new vision of education that truly represents the rights of everyone ...

She added:

Inclusive schools and inclusive education continue to be the cornerstones for moving towards a more equitable and just society for all. (Saleh 2014, 39)

Five years later it is encouraging that Lena Saleh’s comments are now very much reflected in the global policy lead provided by Education 2030.

In her recent comments to us, Lena stressed that in the years preceding Salamanca UNESCO embarked on a number of important projects that prepared the way for the Salamanca debate. Two in particular helped prepare ‘the mindsets of our partners’, first of all:

We arranged regional conferences on new policies and practices in support of inclusion with countries from the different world regions. Also, over a period of fourteen years prior to Salamanca, UNESCO was identifying examples of innovative practices in different countries, documenting them and sharing them across partners around the globe.

And secondly:

The Teacher Education Resource Pack, ‘Special Needs in the Classroom’, championed by our colleague Mel Ainscow, was a very important corner stone, over a period of ten years. This project, which travelled around the world, with debates, discussion and training of resource persons, and applications in schools, certainly made a particular contribution to building the momentum for change

Lena Saleh stressed that the Spanish government had a key role in working with UNESCO to arrange the conference, noting the important contribution of Álvaro Marchesi, who was the Secretary of State for Education at the time. In response to our request for his reflections, Alvaro said:

It is hard to forget the Salamanca Conference. I keep in my memory the collective commitment to move towards an education for all and the joint perception that we are working for a better world. The Salamanca Conference built a permanent, loyal and trusting relationship among the participants. It was an unforgettable experience

He went on to comment:

Since 1994, the Salamanca Conference has been the most important reference for public policies and social debates on special educational needs in most countries of the world. Today, it continues to guide the agenda of national and international inclusive policies.

Another key player was Seamus Hegarty, who was centrally involved in the design of the programme. At the time he was Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales. He commented that 25 years on:

... Salamanca remains a stand-out event for me and, I suspect, for everybody fortunate to have been there. The degree of collegiality and good fellowship among people from all over the world who worked in government, NGOs and in practitioner roles was remarkable. There was a true meeting of minds as experiences, ideas and challenges were shared. Central to this esprit de corps was the ubiquitous dynamism of Lena Saleh from UNESCO. Salamanca was a team enterprise but we all knew that without Lena it would not have happened or certainly not with the same harmonious achievement.

He added:

The Conference was not a stand-alone event but rather the culmination of a series of regional conferences. These served both to raise the profile of special educational provision and to generate powerful examples of practice from around the world.

Peter Mittler, professor at the University of Manchester, chaired the final session of the conference, which included some heated debate about some of the fine detail of the declaration. Looking back, he is rather disappointed by what has happened since 1994, arguing that both UNESCO and governments have failed to follow up on the Salamanca statement in respect to the number of children with disabilities who remain excluded from primary and pre-primary education. He also feels that more should have been done to provide disability-disaggregated data.

Looking for a practitioner perspective, we asked another participant, Cynthia Duk, who, at the time, was a special education teacher in Chile. Subsequently, she has supported developments to promote inclusion in many other Latin American countries. She commented:

The influence that Salamanca has had on the origins and subsequent development of the notion of inclusive education in the countries of Latin America, beyond the borders of special education to be progressively conceived as an issue related to general education, is undeniable. Therefore, it involves the education system as a whole, all the schools and all its actors.

Inclusion has permeated the educational discourse and has had a significant impact on the educational policies and national regulatory frameworks of most Latin American countries. However, the measures adopted by the countries are still insufficient and have had an incipient impact on educational practice. Possibly this is due to the complexity of the transformations that inclusive education demands and the multiple factors that interact in each context for its implementation. In this sense, one of the greatest challenges facing the countries of the region is how to reduce the distance between the discourse of inclusion charged with good

intentions and educational practice. This highlights the need to invest greater efforts in the field of teacher training and professional development.

Cynthia added:

The message of Salamanca remains in force and today more than ever needs to be reinforced by the strong pressures that support its deepest sense of equality and social justice within policy contexts that advocate market forces as a strategy for education, which promote competitiveness, meritocracy and school segregation, under the argument of academic excellence. This is something extremely disturbing in highly unequal and inequitable educational systems, such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean.

We believe that the papers in this special issue offer helpful thoughts in relation to these challenging issues that Cynthia raises.

Developing the special issue

In 2018 proposals were invited for papers to be published in a special issue of the International Journal of Inclusive Education that would focus on progress made since the publication by UNESCO of the Salamanca Statement in 1994. We suggested that the special issue would include papers that provide:

- Analyses of the conceptual basis of the Salamanca Statement and subsequent global developments;
- Critical commentaries on related developments in particular parts of the world; and
- Accounts of empirical studies that relate to the implementation of the Salamanca thinking.

The intention was to have contributions that reflect global developments. The papers would also need to fulfil all of the established requirements of the journal and would therefore be subject to the usual process of independent review.

It is pleasing to report that the response to this call was far beyond our expectations and included an impressive range of papers from all regions of the world. Choosing the papers to include was therefore extremely difficult and we are conscious that many interesting ones have had to be left out. Our hope is that some of these papers will appear in later issues of the journal. We are also exploring the possibility of producing an edited book that would make more of this material available to a much wider readership.

Moving forward

In conclusion, then, we thank all those who put forward papers for this special issue. Their commitment and enthusiasm provide strong evidence of the legacy of Salamanca. The papers we have selected demonstrate that this legacy continues to have a major impact on thinking, policy and practices in the field. At the same time, they illustrate how the contradictions that are apparent in the Salamanca texts have led to uncertainties regarding what the legacy implies. The implication is that moving in an inclusive direction continues to involve struggles to find the most appropriate ways of moving forward.

The papers also remind us that policy is made at all levels of an education system, not least at the school and classroom levels. As such, the promotion of inclusion is not simply a

technical or organizational change – it is a movement in a clear philosophical direction. Moving to more inclusive ways of working therefore requires shifts in policy-makers' values and ways of thinking, which enable them to provide a vision shaping a culture of inclusion, through to significant changes within schools and classrooms. And, of course, this has to involve the wider community.

The way we present the papers seek to guide readers through a consideration of the implication of this argument. With this in mind, we begin with papers that provide an analysis of the conceptualizations within the Salamanca documents. These papers are followed by contributions that look at developments in all regions of the world. In so doing, they consider implications for policy and practice at the different levels of education systems. In this way, the volume provides a rich set of resources that should be of interest to policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and, indeed, anybody who is committed to the principle that every learner matters and matters equally.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Mel Ainscow CBE is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Manchester. A long-term consultant to UNESCO, he is currently working on efforts to promote equity and inclusion globally. Examples of his writing can be found in: 'Struggles for equity in education: The selected works of Mel Ainscow' (Routledge World Library of Educationalists series, 2015).

Professor Roger Slee is also the Founding Editor of the International Journal of Inclusive Education. His latest book is called *Inclusive Education Isn't Dead, It Just Smells Funny*.

Marnie Best (PhD) is a lecturer and researcher in the School of Education at the University of South Australia. She recently coedited *Who's in? Who's out? What to do about inclusive education* (2018).

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