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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Inclusive education: the experience of the School of Gratuitousness

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) welcomes the theme of the Annual full-day meeting on the rights of the child “Empowering children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights, including through inclusive education.”¹

The empowerment of a child with disability is particularly linked to inclusive education. Through education talents and skills are developed and every child is offered the tools to grow and develop his/her abilities for the benefit of the whole society. Children with disabilities through inclusive environments and inclusive education are empowered in the enjoyment of their human rights.

The benefits of inclusive education are supported by forty years of scientific research, demonstrating how children with intellectual disabilities achieve greater academic and social outcomes when educated together with their peers without disabilities. Learning in heterogeneous groups has benefits for everyone: on the one hand, students without disabilities, by learning the value of diversity, hardly develop discriminatory attitudes; on the other hand, pupils with disabilities, improve their school performance and relationship skills, therefore continuing more willingly to study and having more chances to find a job and reach their independence.²

In its first sentences, Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities says “States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning...”³

Furthermore, the importance of inclusive education is also recognized by the Agenda 2030 and SDG4 “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” contains references to disability in:

Target 4.5: “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations” and Target 4.a: “Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.”⁴

As the SDGs are profoundly interconnected so that success in one affects success for others, the importance of education for children with disabilities cannot be overlooked for the benefit of the whole society.

In 1995, APG23, starting from its real-life experiences of discrimination and marginalization of children with disabilities, elaborated a new approach to education and school called School of Gratuitousness. It represented an innovative answer to the needs of all children in the school system, in which students experiencing some difficulties are a resource.

The idea of the School of Gratuitousness takes origin from the broader idea of “Society of Gratuitousness”, a society that is based on the awareness that everything (earth, people, resources etc.) is a gift from God, a society that is based on the values of being, sharing and relating, where the least, the disabled, the marginalised set the pace of the human family’s march being the protagonists of their own development.

In the “profit society” rooted in “*Homo oeconomicus*”, everything and everyone is marketable; the driving forces are “powering, valuing and having” and therefore human beings are valued for what they have and produce. Instead, in the Society of Gratuitousness, rooted in solidarity, social justice and the respect of human rights, a human being has value on its own.

¹ A/HRC/40/27

² <http://www.superando.it/2018/03/21/una-vera-inclusione-non-puo-che-partire-dalla-scuola/>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx#24>

⁴ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>

The building up of the common good prevails in the awareness that everyone holds in his hands the good of the others and that, in the common good, the good of everyone can be found. It is a complete shift of paradigm in terms of the definition of economy, economic process, economic results, the concept of sustainability etc.

The School of Gratuitousness is based on a Manifesto⁵ elaborated in 1998 with the purpose of outlining the fundamental principles of this project. Throughout the years, different experiences have realized the ideals of this innovative approach. The major result has been the realization of an entire primary school based on the school of gratuitousness in Forlì (Italy) in 2017.

The School of Gratuitousness has the purpose of developing, with and for love, the talents and resources of each person following the originality, preciousness and uniqueness that each of us enshrines, leaving aside all logic of individual or collective profit. This school is based on the vital relationships amongst people.

Such relationships are a fundamental guarantee of gratuity and of a true educational method. Interpersonal relationships are the key element for a real integration of everyone in the school system. Without this, education is reduced to simple information; the only objective of the school becomes the learning contents on which personal success and competition, which are privileged instruments of profit and cause for exclusion, develop.

Within the educational relationship, teaching requires commitment by everyone to develop all the potentials as a requirement for an evaluation process with the objective of promoting the individual.

The answer to the needs of students experiencing difficulties in terms of educational pathways, timeframes and individual relationships, requires the involvement of the entire classroom, which is stimulated to reflect on values, on the needs of the individual, and finding better timeframes for all to acquire a deeper knowledge. Students experiencing difficulties are the main actors of the School of Gratuitousness, both as a system and as a set of values. By putting their needs first, we will build a better school for everyone.

Through them, each educator/teacher learns how to improve the educational relationship with the other students. The integration of these students is, therefore, a non-negotiable principle of the School of Gratuitousness. This is why an educational path tailored specifically on each student is elaborated for all in order to guarantee their integration and the realization of their full potential. This is possible with more attention to the programme and to the evaluation system that allowed all students to reach a full education related to their capacity and disability.

In the School of Gratuitousness, the family that is the first educational entity is not a client of the school but rather a strict partner. Such a school requires active participation of the family in educational programs and methodological choices, by building and validating them within its specific role. Educators are active listeners, also receiving from the families all the suggestions concerning emotions and sentiments, sensibility, spirituality, solidarity and acknowledging all the needs that may not be readily understood by them. In this context, the family has the right to actively participate in the evaluation of scholastic results for their children.

In the School of Gratuitousness, the classroom becomes the place where the concept of gratuity is applied, where educators and students share and work together not for profit, but for the passion of teaching and growing. The classroom becomes a community environment for experimentation and life, an environment characterized by the spirit of welcoming and cooperation. Each personal talent becomes everybody else's talent and the limitations of the individual are overcome by being together.

Recently, Ms Catalina Devandas Aguilar, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also stated that 'our classrooms are mirrors of our societies'.⁶

⁵ <https://www.apg23.org/it/scuola/>

⁶ http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco-liaison-office-in-new-york/about-this-office/single-view/news/inclusion_and_empowerment_of_persons_with_disabilities/

Moreover, Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility, rightly said that “the right to inclusive education means transforming culture, policy and practice in all formal and informal educational environments to ensure education is for all learners,” and that “inclusive education is important not only for persons with disabilities but the societies they live in, as it helps to combat discrimination, and to promote diversity and participation.”⁷

APG23, through the experience of the School of Gratuitousness, shares the idea that inclusion in the school setting can bring real benefit in the society as a whole, building an environment in which no one is left behind, contributing to the dissemination of a culture of equal dignity and full respect of human rights for all.

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20437&LangID=E>