

***Embracing Inclusive Approaches
for Children and Youth with Special Education Needs***
11-14 July 2010, Riga, Latvia

Concept for the Early Years Strand

General information about the conference

This international conference is organized jointly by the Council for Exceptional Children, the Division of International Special Education and Services, the Center for Education Initiatives, and the International Step by Step Association. The goal of the conference is to provide an opportunity for decision makers, practitioners, researchers, and representatives of civil society and the business sector to engage in lively and informed discussions about policies, practice, and the current state of expertise in promoting and implementing inclusive education, as a means to meet the special educational needs of children and youth. Building on the experience and strength of all partners and the networks they represent, the conference will approach the topic of provision of support to the diverse educational needs of children and youth in a holistic manner, looking at different reasons why children from an early stage in their lives may find themselves in disadvantaged situations and what special support is needed for their development and learning.

The Early Years Strand

The Conference organizers recognize that the early years are a time of remarkable development, laying the foundation for subsequent development, learning, and success throughout life. Children in the age group from birth to the first years of compulsory formal schooling experience the most rapid period of growth and change during the human lifespan in terms of their maturing bodies and nervous systems; their increasing mobility, communication skills, intellectual capacities, and socio-emotional development; and rapid shifts in their interests and abilities. As stressed in General Comment 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, young children's earliest years are the foundation for their future physical and mental health, emotional security, cultural and personal identity, and competencies¹.

ISSA strongly believes in progressive universalism in ECD, where each child is seen as being entitled to quality early years experiences, keepings a special focus on those most in need. In defining inclusion, ISSA embraces UNESCO's approach, in which inclusion is "*a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.*"²

Recognizing that some children may be more vulnerable to exclusionary practices than others, this strand will explore ways in which settings and services may become more responsive to the

¹ General Comment 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood
http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/crc/crc_general_comments.htm

² Overcoming Exclusion through Inclusive Approaches in Education: A Challenge and a Vision. Conceptual Paper, UNESCO 2003

diversity of children and young people in their communities. Participants will also discuss how to raise the awareness and ability of families to advocate for and protect the interests of their children, as well as to make intelligent choices regarding the best options for their children's education.

To provide maximum support to young children for successful development and learning, ISSA joins voices with other international key players to advocate for early childhood programs that attend to health, nutrition, security, and learning of children, as well as providing holistic development. ISSA sees the Riga Conference as an opportunity for participants to make a strong, consolidated message about the importance of ***ECD policies and programs for promoting and implementing inclusive provisions for young children and families***, with a special focus on situations where disadvantages may lead to multiple disabilities.

This strand will explore special needs as an outcome of complex interactions between health conditions and the physical and social environment, and will stress the importance of ***early intervention and support to development***, offering practical solutions to deal with complex issues which may prevent young children from learning and from developing to their full potential.

Expected outcomes of the Early Years Strand

The Early Years Strand of the conference will build on the belief that the early years offer the unique opportunity to foster developmental gains in children, to nurture diverse abilities, and to overcome disadvantages and inequalities. It will contribute to the Conference by:

- Developing shared understanding of a broad concept of inclusive education and specific tasks and priorities in the early years, bringing special attention to the need for preventive measures and interventions
- Showcasing a range of relevant policies, practices, and challenges in inclusive approaches to ECD, including formal and non-formal education provisions
- Emphasizing the need to raise awareness about the advantages of inclusive approaches and the contribution that each individual brings to society
- Providing a venue for developing new partnerships and foundations for effective networking
- Gathering proposals for changes in ECD policies and practice, building on expertise from around the world

Focus Areas

Presenters in the Early Years strand are encouraged to focus on the following topics:

- Policies and practices that stress the importance of holistic approaches to ECD and inclusive education
- The need for family-friendly and efficient systems for early identification of factors hindering development and learning of children; examples of prevention and early intervention programs
- Preparing environments, professionals, and society for successful mainstreaming of children with disabilities, serving their educational needs, and promoting development of

their full potential; promoting respect and celebration of diversity in preschool provisions and school, as a way of attaining social inclusion

- The importance of addressing the needs of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in order to make sure their development and learning is not hindered
- The need to define and provide high quality inclusive education in preschool and primary school settings; examples of good practices
- Consequences of the explicit and implicit contexts that feed social and pedagogical exclusion, and the relationship between a prescriptive curriculum and the processes of exclusion,
- Ensuring smooth transitions to compulsory/formal schooling to continue an inclusive approach for children with disabilities and any type of special education needs and break the cycle of exclusion
- The dilemma between the emphasis on learning outcomes of children and inclusive practices; do assessment and evaluation lead to or undermine inclusive practices?
- Policies and practices for training and ongoing professional development of all professionals working with young children; raising their awareness and competences to implement inclusive education for the benefit of all children
- Support to parents/families for quality of interactions with children, improving home learning environments, engaging in community based initiatives, becoming a stronger voice on behalf of the interest of their children.

There is great potential in the CEE/CIS region to develop comprehensive early years interventions, promoting and supporting appropriate policy and practice reforms that build on the foundations of strong health systems and specialized services available in many countries, despite the persistence of segregated provisions prevalent so far.

The Strand aims to contribute to increasing awareness of the benefits for the whole society of integrating children with special education needs in every aspect of political, social, economic, and cultural life. Bringing together professionals working with children of different age groups, researchers, community organizations, business representatives, and decision makers will emphasize the advantages of an integrated approach and the interrelatedness of efforts and consequences.

Other main topics for presentations and discussions in the conference will include:

- Access, Quality, Equity as Cornerstones of Inclusive Education
- Policy Development and Implementation
- Developing Supportive Environments and Instructional Strategies
- Ongoing Assessment and Planning for Improved Performance
- Integrating Research into Practice
- Education in Inclusive Schools – from Early Years to Life-long Learning Opportunities
- Life Transitions and Striving towards Independent Living
- Innovative Programs and Initiatives
- Role of Civil Society in Advocacy, Program Implementation and Scaling-up Best Practices

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