A SHORT HISTORY OF THE **WORLD FORUM FOUNDATION WORKING GROUP** ON **INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

INSPIRATION:

While the Working Group took form at the 2011 WFF in Hawaii, we started our journey informally in 2009 in Belfast. Here we were enlightened about the sad state of children with disabilities around the world. Jane Betz shared her UNESCO Policy Brief on Early Childhood Education and Children with Special Needs in Emergencies. The poignant takeaway was:

"Worldwide, there are about 650 million persons with disabilities. This accounts for 10% of the global population and constitutes more than 20% of the world's poorest people. Children with disabilities experience stigma from birth and are more prone to exclusion, concealment, abandonment, institutionalization, and abuse. Strikingly, 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school."

This, was in strong contrast to the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 23. It states:

"*A mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.*"

It became apparent over many informal conversations during the Conference that our individual stories of the plight of children with disabilities mirrored these inequities covered in the two documents. Our friends from Nepal reported the stigma attached to children with a disability which meant parents had to hide these children and keep them at home alone when they went to work or even a ventilated barrel. Children with disabilities in Malaysia requiring wheel chairs or compromised mobility never had the opportunity to enter any play structures available to non-disabled children in local parks and community centers. Children with learning and cognitive challenges were falling further and further behind in reading skills in Singapore due to few available assessment services for proper diagnoses.

Compounding these physical and mental challenges, rampant discrimination toward some ethnic and religious groups was prevalent. We were mobilized and united in our desire to form a working group to address these issues and create a forum for finding better outcomes for these children who were unilaterally being treated so poorly.

FORMALIZATION:

We blasted into the 2011 WFF Conference in Hawaii with high energy and resolve. During our all day pre-conference meeting, we got to work. Anne Sivanathan (Malaysia), Depak Raj Sapkota (Nepal), and Roberta Goldberg (USA) led the meeting with 20 delegates from nine countries. Later in the Conference, two panels with 8 presenters shared their stories of working with children. We learned in depth about policies, programs, challenges to providing services, models for inclusive education, and the role of families in 5 countries.
It became clear that there exists great diversity across countries in policies, resources and capacity, but at the same time several commonalities emerged. We left Hawaii with clear action steps:

1. There was a critical need for a Working Group on Inclusion

2. A group name and Mission Statement were needed

3. Explore definitions and terms for inclusion that would represent our broad community in the World Forum

4. Stay connected

5. Gather country data around "inclusion" and "special needs", educational policies, the look of programs and services, key challenges of accommodating children, needs of families, and decision guidelines

ACTIONS:

By the 2014 World Forum, these steps were actualized and reported out in pre-conference sessions. The emphasis for our panel presentations were inclusion, best practices, and practical program guidelines.
Our group was launched as the Working Group on Including Children with Special Needs and our Mission Statement is,

"Addressing the myriad issues facing children with special needs and their families and to advocate for their full inclusion".

We broadened our range or participation in the pre-session planning meetings with participants from Nigeria, Columbia, Puerto Rico, Ethiopia, Hawaii,Australia for the first time joining our returning friends from Namibia, Nepal, Canada, USA, and Malaysia. This gave us an opportunity to refine our mission statement and goals in light of the larger, more global perspective. It truly secured our identity as a working group, and subsequently we were able to share effectively with other working groups.

Over the next two years, we contributed to working groups on Rights of Children in Children's Homes,Connecting Children to Nature, Designing Environments for Children, and Leadership. We deepened our personal ties in the working group and committed to more frequent communication between conferences.

Moving forward to New Zealand (2017) and Macao (2019), we added new members from Bhutan, Nigeria, and Laos. We focused attention on issues of program practices, resilience, parent roles, and evidence-based practices.

Throughout the Pandemic, our zoom meetings became more frequent (1 X month), as it created a forum for our membership to share challenges and solutions during an extremely difficult time for families with children with special needs. We chose to conduct a Global Café on parents getting through the Pandemic with children with disabilities (See website resources) and it was the topic of our panels in Orlando, FLA (2022) and Panama (2023). Most recently in Vancouver (2024), we focused on professional development for expanding inclusive environments. This topic arose out of the Inclusion Survey which we conducted in 2022 – 2023. The Inclusion Survey was designed to get a "pulse" of the kinds of services currently being provided to children with special needs around the world.

The survey questions were developed by members of the Working Group who are experts in early childhood development, education, and disabilities from Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Nigeria, Canada, and the US. It was distributed by the WFF to 100 members who had attended Global Cafés related to inclusion. A Google Doc survey instrument was used to collect the data with a 50% return rate; 42 respondents participated from 22 different countries. The Inclusion Survey results were very informative and became the catalyst for two current projects: The Inclusion Stories Project and the Guidelines for Inclusion Project. All of these will be the topic of our Working Group Panel at Malaysia 26.

In light of increased interest in the topic of inclusion in regards to the discussion on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), we found it important to define our "space" in the Equity discussion as focusing on inclusion of children with disabilities and their families. However, we are constantly evolving and reconsidering our domain of interest as we embrace new concepts in our field. In our pre-meeting in Vancouver (2024), the terms "neurodiversity and "ableism" were discussed as alternatives to "disability" as well as broadening inclusion to include children with serious social and emotional behavioral needs due to Pandemic fallout.

FUTURE PLANNING:

Our working group on Including Children with Special Needs continues to passionately mobilize and united in our desire to find better outcomes for children with Special Needs around the world. As a way to stay connected and form a place to hold stories, guidelines and resources to develop and enhance inclusion practices we will continue to build our World Forum presence through our Working Group website found at https://worldforumfoundation.org/workinggroups/special-needs/.
Please visit our site to build on your own professional development, find resources to share and/or connect with fellow advocates on inclusion.