

Building the capacity to transform education in Colombia: The Asdown experience

By Monica Cortes, Executive Director, Asdown.



Colombia is a large and beautiful South American country with nearly 50 million population. It is also a country with major inequalities between rich and poor, urban and rural areas - and lives with the damage arising from 50 years of civil war, including 6 million displaced people mainly resident around the edges of the major cities. It's necessary to add that the Covid-19 pandemic has made these inequalities deeper.

In relation to inclusion, there is some helpful legislation but also many traditional attitudes. The pandemic has highlighted inequalities affecting students with disabilities arising from poverty and lack of access to internet networks, made worse where there are inadequate adjustments and supports for their participation in virtual learning processes.

I'm a teacher, I worked for 16 years in schools in my country and I have two sons: my older son Alejandro is 21 and he was born with Down's syndrome. For that reason, I started to prepare myself in all the different things associated with Down's syndrome. I also began a family group that wanted to find ways of helping other families who had sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities and I learnt about their rights to be included in society.

In 2005 we created Asdown Colombia, a family organization with the principal objective of promoting the rights and the inclusion in our society of all persons with intellectual disabilities. We started to work supporting families, promoting inclusive education and practicing advocacy in political places, because we understood that we needed to be there saying that our children, young people and adults are also persons that have rights. We have also worked to promote the growth of self advocacy in Colombia.

The education situation in Colombia

In Colombia since 1997 we have had wide legislation that recognizes the right to education for all persons with disabilities but there remains a big problem in changing attitudes in relation to mainstream educational participation (and also in the large private education sector) because of the continuing predominance of the 'medical model' of disability, with the consequence that teachers believe students with disabilities need special teachers and therapy and school leaders continue to practice discrimination against disabled people.

Similarly, families consider that the regular schools aren't well-prepared for disabled children and so they need special education. But I know that we have taken good steps, because the government doesn't accept segregated foundations or schools as

an option for students with disabilities and in the last 5 years, we have new laws and guidelines to implement the mandate of the UNCRPD.

Asdown's focus on inclusive education

Since we established ourselves as a group of families, we decided that the best way to change the images and prejudices that we heard from others about persons with intellectual disabilities would be to fight for their inclusion in all the spaces where their siblings without disabilities could participate. It is in school where we would make other children see them with different eyes and recognize them as persons. As already noted, we don't have special education, the Ministry of Education doesn't finance segregated schools. However, there are schools that have exclusive classrooms within them, addressed to students with cognitive disabilities or high support needs. It can be challenging for families but where they have reason to trust that their children will do well in inclusive schools and the skills to demand this, we are making progress. In 2020 for example, in the middle of the pandemic, we had several students with intellectual disabilities who graduated from high school and for us this shows that everything we have worked for has been worth it.



Gabriel Gardeazabal with his family on his graduation's day from high school in 2020. Asdown Colombia Campaign "We believe in you".

Every day we have more allies, from the educational institutions that have understood and demonstrated the value of inclusive education, teachers, professionals from different disciplines, lawyers and many others who join both nationally and regionally in supporting our work to ensure education for all; no-one left behind. As an Association, we understand the importance of building strategic alliances and working collaboratively with others.

Another activity that we coordinate since 2010 is the *Families for the Change Net*, a group of family organizations and leaders that work in 22 cities in Colombia promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities.



Valledupar, Colombia: training journey with 120 teachers of public schools.

I consider that joining our voices like this is the only way to gain the strength to change the world for people with disabilities. In this network we have worked to achieve a common vision of what is inclusive education; we analyze the experiences that families face to get their sons and daughters included in the regular school system in different cities and we try to give advocacy tools (e.g. relating to the laws defining the right to be included in regular education) to the local leaders in order that they can give good support to other families.

Today, therefore a major strand of our work as an Association is the provision of training and advisory services, not only for families but also for teachers and educational institutions.

From local to national advocacy

With the Network of Families for Change, we contribute to the work of the National Disability Council, we participate in technical roundtables promoted by different sectors of the government, for example on: childhood, adolescence and youth with disabilities; the implementation of inclusive education; and building the national care system. Also we work with other groups to promote legal capacity and the right to decide on health and reproductive issues for persons with intellectual disabilities.

We have also increasingly been considered by the Ministry of Education as experts and have worked as advisors on different topics concerned with inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities, for example in designing new laws, training for teachers and guidance on working with families.

In addition, one of the most important things that I have done since 2011 has been to be elected and re-elected to represent persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in this National Disability Council. In this place I have learnt about how to make effective advocacy to defend the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities

and how we could change laws to include our people in all policies and programs that the government is developing.

Learning internationally

Asdown joined Inclusion International in 2008 and have built our capacity in the field of inclusive education with their help and experts from different parts of the world such as Gordon Porter, Diane Richler, Inés Elvira de Escallon, Ignacio Calderon, David Towell and many others, learning more about not just the principles but also the changes in policy, culture and practice required to guarantee an inclusive education for all in our country.

Also in 2008, we started research about the status of inclusive education in Colombia, with UN Voluntary Fund resources and with support from Inclusion International. We also organized teacher seminars with expert training about inclusive education and we visited the inclusive education models in Graz, Austria and in New Brunswick, Canada, to learn more.



Study Tour to New Brunswick, Canada, 2012.

Since 2015, Asdown has also belonged to a Latin American Regional Net for inclusive education with 8 other countries and we have the opportunity to share good experiences. For example, during 2020 we organized 2 Regional webinars and also launched a report on the right to education in Latin America, detailing important challenges shared by the countries in our Region:

<https://rededucacioninclusiva.org/estrategias-de-incidencia/nuevo-informe-el-derecho-a-la-educacion-inclusiva-en-america-latina/>

<https://rededucacioninclusiva.org/>

Asdown itself

Asdown Colombia has 35 families and persons with disabilities as members, a board with 7 persons and 7 paid professional staff. To function at this level requires an annual budget near to \$40.000 US.

However, the impact of our actions reaches many more families. In recent years we have reached at least 15,000 families with direct support and guidance, mostly in Colombia but also in other countries. In relation to teachers and other professionals, we have reached thousands through sharing our knowledge about inclusive education.

Our main financial resources today are the technical projects that we manage, most financed by international organizations. We also have fundraising activities, such as our 'Asdown friends' donor program and also an annual fundraising event that was a golf tournament until the pandemic required some new thinking. We also finance our organization through the training and consulting of teachers in matters related to inclusive education at the local, national and international levels.



Asdown Self-advocate group: Standing, Joaquin, Miguel, Andrea, Edwin, Mónica, Jorge, Brenda, Alvaro, Paula. Crouched: Johanna, Camila, Victoria, Laura y John.

Until now, we have never charged any fee for services to families or for self-advocates training, seeing this as essential to our mission.

During the pandemic we have managed to sustain our work accompanying families and engaging the educational community at a distance through a series of 'pedagogical gatherings' on-line. During 2020 we held 20 gatherings with the participation of more than 40 panelists. These are all available on the Youtube Asdown Channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3C8-tUyQZkfsz3_kJ-2kg

My own family experience

In my case, my son has participated in regular school all his life, graduating from high school in 2018, a wonderful achievement. I have had to learn a lot about how to encourage teachers to understand what is the best way to help my son learn. I have had the advantage that I am a teacher, but of course I myself had to learn about how Alejandro learns and what are the best ways of developing his abilities.

Since graduating, my son has been admitted to a school that trains actors and has attended 4 semesters, with excellent results, managing how to learn at a distance in this time of confinement. Undoubtedly, we should always follow the interests and aptitudes of our children and seek to enhance them. Please, families, try to change the idea that they need special programs that are considered only for people with intellectual disabilities, without taking into account their likes, interests and motivation: this is the secret of success in getting a life in the community for our sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities.



Actors in training: David, Santiago, Alejandro y Juliana.

But it's not the same for all families, because few disabled children continue education beyond primary school. Our whole system struggles with introducing flexible curricula and universal design for learning but, this is lost in tertiary education.

We know that it is necessary to implement innovative strategies, to have support teachers in the school environment who contribute to the work of adapting the curriculum, and supporting teachers in all areas of their work to take responsibility for all students.

Our strategies looking forward

There is much more work we need to do with families so that they have what they need to demand the right to inclusive education for their children. Looking forward, we need to continue developing campaigns to change public perceptions of disability

and to promote inclusive education, ensuring that the whole education community understands that this will be better education for all.

It's necessary to develop good teacher training because our teachers have been taught within the assumptions of the medical model, but not in the idea that all children can learn irrespective of their labels: teachers need appropriate strategies to teach everyone within the framework of the same broad curriculum.

Asdown has training and technical knowledge that serves to promote inclusive education. Today we have a training course for teachers that we are putting on line and we are making this available through all the local education departments in the cities across our country.

We will continue promoting training on line with experts that address high-impact topics in the journey towards achieving inclusive education.

Additionally, with our networks of allies such as the Regional network for inclusive education, we will launch a virtual course with world experts that will be open to teachers from the countries of Latin America.

Most fundamentally, families must have a shared vision of what inclusion means and how they can best support their children in the school environment. This remains fundamental to Asdown's work.

