

Classroom Assistant Training

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In 2002 Children of Fire started running short courses in Johannesburg, South Africa, for classroom assistants working with disabled children. Participants had to have Standard Seven or a higher level of education and to be competent in understanding and speaking English. They also had to be young enough to be open to new ideas.

The assistants did not pay for the training as they were all from extremely poor backgrounds. They were given subsistence during the course, assistance with transport costs and small items to assist their families in recognition of the fact that they could not even look for piece-jobs (part time work) if they were studying.

More training will be run in December 2002 and January 2003.

These courses arose from the need to help eight-year-old burns survivor Dorah Mokoena (see elsewhere on website) to learn, and the current inability of the South African Education System to effectively assist her – most particularly as a child has the “right” to remain living with their family while at school, and to learn within their educational district.

Three week courses



The courses, varying initially between one and three weeks long (and with continual in-service training for the assistant/s working regularly with Dorah), focused on the practical aspects of making and adapting normal teaching curricula and equipment to suit the needs of the disabled pupil.

They also tried to get the assistant to think herself/himself into the pupil’s shoes and to find a way in which to explain concepts regardless of the pupil’s type of disability. The kind of person who would become a classroom assistant in South Africa limits the syllabus for such a course. If an assistant was employed by the state, she/he might earn R2000 a month in 2002 with additional benefits such as medical aid, pension, holiday pay and sick pay.

For the employee to be satisfied with such a salary, she would – with luck – have matriculated – but would probably not be sufficiently educated to be able to consider teacher training as a career path.

And yet – with the unrealistic, even hopelessly idealistic, SA government policy on inclusion of disabled children into mainstream schools, the only way that it can work is with qualified classroom assistants.

They would be cheaper to employ than teachers and would probably be prepared to carry out the more repetitive teaching that might be essential for the pupil to learn yet boring for the teacher to teach.

Following on from the apartheid years and the prevalence of nannies for middle class families, it seems that many South Africans think a classroom assistant would wipe bottoms and noses of disabled children, maybe help with minor medical needs, or would push the child's wheelchair if he had one. The idea of a classroom assistant being, in effect, a junior teacher, still seems hard for people to grasp.

How to teach

The classroom assistant needs to know how to teach – from simple concepts like “a picture is worth a thousand words” to how the brain processes information; how to ensure (and check) that the pupil has understood; and how to make topics enjoyable, easy to learn and easy ways to retain the information.... especially when the pupil does not have either a complete body or a fully-functioning mind, or sometimes is disabled both mentally and physically.

It seems to have always been easier to dumb-down the syllabus rather than to stretch and see how far a child can go. If the classroom assistants were themselves never mentally stretched in their conventional schooling, they will find that concept particularly hard.

Wrapped in cotton wool

Following litigation after a “normal” child fell off a wall in a school playground and was injured; SA schools seem to verge on paranoia about letting a physically disabled child have freedom of movement or freedom of association. These “rights” might be enshrined in labour law but are denied to the child who wants to mix easily with his or her able-bodied classmates.

The classroom assistant is then also denied her rights as she cannot even have tea with the teachers at breaktime as her “charge” cannot ever be left unattended. It is important for staff and pupils to have some time to socialise with their peers during the working day. Classroom assistants need to understand the legal precedents or the simple prejudice that guide the actions of others they work with, and to have the confidence to explore the middle ground. The assistants need to know that they will gain specialist knowledge that qualified teachers and principals may not have – and yet these “more-qualified” colleagues may not want to accept the wisdom of the assistant.

Sometimes classroom assistants are called “facilitators” where the child is physically or mentally incapable of feeding themselves or of moving around the school building or of keeping themselves clean. Facilitators are paid for by parents – so disabled children in poor South African families who would need a facilitator to go to school, simply don’t go to school.

Helping the Blind or Low Vision Pupil

To start to think how to help a blind pupil, the classroom assistants are blindfolded and told to find their way around the outside of a building that they do not know well. While they know that the environment is not highly dangerous, because they have some prior understanding of the space, they nonetheless exhibit fear. Even though they are told to use one hand to maintain contact with a wall at all times, they are scared of falling or of tripping. They walk, tentatively and the wiser ones skim the air in advance with a foot or a hand, or both. They hunch their bodies, unconsciously trying to lower their centre of gravity. They start to notice that there is information even in the surface of a large glass window or the rough texture of a brick. They observe that these structures have different textures and different sounds. They suddenly realise how treacherous uneven steps are; how a dustbin or a drain seems like a trap set to thwart them; how very very hard it is to not be able to see where one is going. (Similar training is used for firefighters in smoke houses).

They understand why blind children might not want to explore this frightening dark world where unseen sharp and rough things can hurt them ... and how that lack of exploration limits the child’s knowledge and development and also makes sighted people think that they are not interested in the world around them... and hence that they are “stupid”.

As the classroom assistants walk blindly along, they also become more aware of the sounds that might previously have just merged into background noise. A squeaky gate, footsteps on the grass, someone approaching them ... the need to talk and to identify who or what is making that sound (Dorah says “Hi” to anyone approaching her, because she wants them to answer and so identify themselves.) There are birds singing and cars driving by and aeroplanes in the sky... but if the car noise comes towards them, or worse still, the barking of an unseen dog, again they experience that rush of fear just because they cannot see.

So the assistant start to learns how vital it is to be able to really observe the environment and the pupil. He/she learns simple things like in guiding a blind child, if you maintain physical contact with the child and raise your leg closest to them when you start to climb steps, then the child will feel that leg lift and will know that she has to do the same.

Pushing the child in front of you is frightening; walking alongside her is safe and supportive. Or guiding her through words, to maintain contact with a wall and to “step up... it’s a large step, step down... it’s a tiny step, flat surface again” and then there is teamwork or best of all, the pupil feels in charge of her environment. (Similar teamwork with “blind leading the blind” trust is encouraged through high-priced business executive team- building trips in the South African bush).

Uneven grass is more frightening than flat concrete; steep gradients are terrifying. Slippery surfaces and water are unpredictable but sometimes are fun.

Enter a building and the type of flooring has different sounds. There is a good echo from timber; muffling from carpet. Keep the carpet always in the same place and the pupil can identify the room or the place in the room, just from the type of flooring. Move furniture and floor covering around and it is like someone playing plate tectonics with a map of the world: simply unfair.

The assistants first learn what they are expected to teach their pupil(s). They sharpen their own senses and start to observe everything around them with more care.

Exercise

After mobility comes exercise. Again, to move freely when you are scared of falling is a difficult barrier to overcome. Blind children fear falling. A disabled child like Dorah who is also an amputee and also has a bony deficit (a hole) in her forehead, knows that if she falls, the brittle skin on her arm stumps can break and bleed. She resists exercise on hard surfaces, particularly rough stones or concrete.

An exercise regime is to help the child to move around, to help the child to be fit, supple and to have good posture, and in many cases, special exercises can be designed to stimulate the brain through rocking, rotating, spinning, in different dimensions, replicating the movements that a sighted child might have made at key stages of development but that the blind child missed out – maybe all from the fear of falling down.

Exercise requires equipment: something the SA government does not seem to budget for in inclusion policies. In fact many schools still seem not to include physical education as part of the syllabus. Sometimes equipment needed is specific to one child. Large and small physiotherapy balls, physiotherapy mats; boards on wheels; rocking boards. While some schools don’t yet have electricity or running water, let alone enough teachers, it seems a ridiculous luxury to equip a school for one or two disabled pupils to be included. But the other side of the coin is that the disabled child usually has immeasurable benefits from being able to remain living at home with their families and also to attend school and then the few hundred rands for a few items of equipment seems entirely paltry.

Teaching floating, sinking, volume, heavy, light.

The classroom assistants learned different ways of teaching basic mathematical concepts. However, in the case of Dorah where inclusion was meant to be put into practice at EP Baumann Primary School in Mayfair, Johannesburg, we were hampered by never being given details of the rest of the class's intended activities even one day in advance (despite repeated written and oral requests). So it was impossible to plan her education around that of the other pupils. Inclusion cannot work without co-operation.

To teach floating and sinking, a washing up bowl will do but a paddling pool is better. For some aspects a heated physiotherapy pool or a full size swimming pool, are best of all. The classroom assistants found everyday objects to teach the topic – most balls float as do leaves, paper and feathers; stones sink, as do cold drink bottles full of water. They emptied the plastic bottle with the pupil feeling the lid, feeling and hearing the water pouring out. They put the lid back on the bottle and showed how the plastic bottle would now float.

The water from the bottle can be poured into large or small containers – when it overflows ... or when it takes two bottles of water to fill the container, the pupil starts to understand “volume” and even addition and subtraction.

Where possible the assistant him/herself should be able to swim so that they can teach pupils water safety as well as water science. In a pool, the pupil can learn how they themselves float. A swimming pool is a good teaching area for many different disabled pupils and helps with relaxation and easier movement – but the teacher or assistant *must* get into the water with them.

Teaching taste, taste buds, the tongue

The words sweet, sour, salty, bitter, seem etched on your tongue. But the classroom assistants learned that to teach the words to a low vision child or just one with delayed development, they need packs of food and teaspoons or plastic coffee stirrers. The assistant may never have studied biology at school so she'd best try out the tastes herself first of all.

The same topic can be used to introduce the need for speech therapy and how such therapists work. Some therapists use tasty foods on a thin spatula to encourage a disabled pupil to pop out her tongue. Some ask for hard crunchy foods for “mouth exercise”. The classroom assistant learns how mouth injury at a crucial stage of development affects how, or if, a child learns to speak. The assistant learns that cleft palate problems can be related to dietary deficiencies and the urgency for children to have corrective surgery when they are very small.

The importance of diet and the effect of certain foods on the pupil and his ability to manage to eat them are all discussed.

Safety and boiled sweets, elementary first aid against choking; being aware of allergies; the sense of avoiding tartrazine and checking lists of ingredients on food products; the equal sense of avoiding medication such as Ritalin for children unless all the reasons for taking such a substance are clearly defined and full written details are provided on side effects, addiction or withdrawal. The assistant learns that parents need such information in their home language to be sure that they really understand the potential ramifications for the child.

With a disabled child, the classroom assistant also has to ensure that other children don't give her some of their own food, which might be harmful. Organisations like Marang House in Johannesburg have found that they cannot safely include diabetic children in normal schools because of this problem. The children are not so disabled so as to justify employing a classroom assistant for them but they can be in danger if they are allowed to mix freely with other children.

Cradle to grave and lateral thinking

Cooking – raw materials/ingredients – helping the pupil to understand the world around him, involves a cradle to grave approach. They can start by touching grass; touching grain. Taking grain off the stem and helping the child to grind it into flour – then using the flour to cook something. Eating it and talking about what happens to the food in the body, and what happens to the parts of the plant that were not used for eating, gives the pupil a better understanding of diet and environment.

Classroom assistants had generally not come across fresh rosemary, mint, chives, oregano, thyme and other herbs. They were shown how the disabled child's learning project could be used to include the other children in her syllabus. Other pupils too could grow and taste the herbs, even in the classroom.

Learning to source the educational material (and persuading a school to budget for it) is difficult for the classroom assistant who may have a limited range of foodstuffs in her own diet and depending on her own cultural background, would not normally be inclined to explore shops that are identified with different cultural groups or people on a higher income level. Teachers, pupils and the assistant can cooperate on sourcing materials. The more diverse the background of all the pupils, the easier this will be.

Getting pieces of raw sugarcane or honeycomb, the assistant lets the child touch and taste the most natural product and its refined version in a packet or a jar – and talks about how one is changed into the other.

A mass of other learning activities can develop from one subject. They could play word games with herbs that are girls' names or shape the letters of the words, even if it is just the H of honey. Rhyming honey, money, funny. Talking about words that also occur in songs or favourite nursery rhymes ("The queen was in the parlour eating bread and honey, the king was in the counting house, counting out his money").

Teaching the classroom assistant ways in which to explain complicated words like “king” in a simple way “important man/big man” can be enough for some children. But the classroom assistant has to think of parallels in the child’s own life to which unusual vocabulary can be related.

One assistant was given a book that explained how/why people sneeze and hiccup and complained that she did not understand it – even though the book was aimed at children. The limitations of South Africa’s educational past curb how effective an assistant can be.

Rattles and drums

Music, rhythm, making plastic bottles and rice into rattles, tins into drums, bottles into whistles, collecting normal domestic “waste” and manufacturing teaching toys from it. Initially the classroom assistants resist using rubbish – preferring expensive plastic battery-operated toys. They are reminded of the financial constraints that affect most schools and families and the advantage of making one’s own instruments – for the music and also for the design and technology skills that are gained. One of the most useful aspects of a well-trained classroom assistant is when he or she can source materials and make learner-specific teaching aids, from a rattle to a tactile map of the classroom. The assistants also used tapes to dance to and to sing to. They tape the child singing or talking and play it back to her to teach her how the “music machine” works.

The assistants took old large coffee tins, let the child smell the coffee odour still inside, let her feel the large plastic lid and to bang on the lid and on the other end, to hear the different sounds made by plastic and metal. A hard plastic drumstick was placed in Dorah’s right-hand-prosthesis so that she could bang the drum and make a “bigger” sound than was possible with her “hands” (stumps). Living without fingers is no reason not to make music.

Musical activity is a great leveller when including disabled children in the normal class.

The alphabet; Moon, Braille, signing

The classroom assistants had to feel objects with the fingers and with their toes. They had to wear double layers of socks like mittens to try to empathise with a fingerless child and to imagine the detail (or lack of detail) that she could feel. They found they were very clumsy with their fingers inside socks but still they managed to flush the loo even if they couldn’t turn on taps. It is beyond the financial means of most families or schools to alter all the furnishings like taps, to allow maximum independence of a disabled child. The assistants learned that there are other disabled children who have all their fingers but who nonetheless cannot use them at all.

They looked at toys with letters on and discussed their dimensions in relation to the size of the pupil. They tried making larger cut-out cardboard letters. They looked at Braille and they looked at the largest point size of Moon – a simple sort of raised shape language that could help people with no or few fingers. They discussed where these resources could be bought or borrowed from. They were previously unaware of Moon or Braille, let alone the idea of “point sizes” or that failing-vision adults could request large print books from a public library.

Again they looked at the concept of understanding. A pupil like Dorah could repeat the whole alphabet and knew the order of some of it; she knew that D started Dorah her name. But did she have any concept of the spelling of words? There was clearly a need for more teaching equipment appropriate to her body dimensions. The assistants were resistant to the idea of using Dorah’s toes to do the work that fingers might usually do, but learned that she might learn to read Moon with her toes... but that maybe the assistant or class teacher should learn how to read it first.

The assistants also learned the value of signing. There is Sign Language used by deaf people across the world, but it has colloquial differences within a country and many differences internationally. Its biggest drawback is that “normal” people rarely bother to learn it and so two-way communication is difficult.

There are also Makaton signs but the same drawback exists, because most of the signs are barely understood by the wider society, even if a child’s family, friends and teachers can learn to use them.

There are other signs like: nodding one’s head to say “yes”, shaking one’s head to say “no”, waving a hand goodbye, shaking another person’s hand in greeting, hugging or kissing someone as affection. The assistants looked at what a particular physically disabled child could learn and at how they would explain the relevance of the signing to her.

Prejudice

Initially some classroom assistants had to look at their own prejudice towards disability. They talked about why people fear “ugliness” or disfigurement. They prepared themselves for prejudice from other learners, teachers, other learners’ parents, even school governing bodies. They learned that other pupils could be shielded from the most disturbing elements of the behaviour or appearance of the child they look after, without denigrating the needs of the disabled child. They learned how quickly people get used to seeing an “odd-looking” child but that assistants must watch out for newcomers (like the fresh intake of pupils at the start of the academic year) who would generally not be prepared and could react with shock or in a way that upset the disabled pupil. The assistant should advise and remind the Principal of a school of the need to prepare new pupils to meet their disabled schoolmate.

Zoo

Many teaching materials are simply too remote from the subject. Teaching a child about animals and the zoo requires a trip to touch them – or if that is impossible, at least to look, smell, hear them and to feel a glass fibre model of an elephant to understand just how big it is. Johannesburg Zoo has cows, pigs, goats, horses and sheep that can sometimes be touched (though the ponies bite...). Also by prior arrangement there are animals that have been regularly handled, like rabbits and chickens, which the pupil can pick up. The facility is not free but it is an invaluable resource.

Some materials can be taken to, or made in, the classroom including sheep's wool loose or on card, woollen yarn, a woollen jersey, again to not just explain the animal but also the human relationship with them.

Unsupervised, the assistants visited the zoo with a disabled child. They did not have the confidence to get the maximum learning experience out of the visit by asking for help from the zoo's staff.

Parental role

The assistants learned the importance of including parents in the decision-making and learning process; being open to new ideas – e.g. inviting a sibling to be part of the educational day. (Schools are not receptive to this, though it is of enormous assistance with a disabled child who has an able-bodied sibling).

Too often parents don't want to sit down and talk with a teacher as they feel they are going to be reprimanded – rather than that teaching a child is a team effort that includes the parent as an equal. Teachers also often talk down to parents, sometimes with no knowledge of the parent's professional expertise, let alone the fact that the parent is usually the most knowledgeable person about the child. A wise classroom assistant can bridge the divide as she is seen as less threatening a figure than the teacher; however if the assistant is assumed to be less-educated, some parents will be unwilling to listen to her advice or to co-operate with her.

Parental privacy and dignity is also included in classroom assistant training. It is inappropriate to subject the parent of a disabled child to criticism on every level – whether direct or implied – and yet this “holier-than-thou” attitude from teachers is sadly common. They comment on what the child eats at school (even when it is only one meal out of three that the child has each day), what she wears (“the pupil wears boy's underwear”!), and have perceptions on hygiene without bothering to understand what happens to a child who e.g. is continually dribbling from mouth injury or whose skin is so damaged from burns that she sweats more than an adolescent even while still in her early years at school.

Teachers have to be taught that there are boundaries that they need to respect or to at least learn about before rude, unsolicited intrusion into the privacy of family life. It seems to be thought that the more disabled a child is, the ruder a teacher may be. Teacher training may not include courtesy to parents, and understanding of how hard it is physically, mentally and financially to care for a disabled child, but it should. There needs to be recognition of the guilt that often accompanies having a child who was injured (maybe the parent believes through his/her own negligence) or who was born disabled (and many cultures also then attribute blame to the parent). That frequently disables the parent because these feelings are life-long – not limited to the few hours of school every day.

Condemnation, judgment, arrogance from teaching staff is inappropriate and damaging. From ubuntu (humanity) alone, they need not to think that physical exhaustion of the parent is just the parent's problem, but to recognise that to give a disabled child an education is society's duty and even the support and the self-esteem of the parent is a factor to take into consideration. Classroom assistants discussed these attitudes but felt wary of speaking out in front of "better educated" teachers.

Dangers

The classroom assistants need to understand and to anticipate dangers. Safety or mobility equipment – checking that a child in a wheelchair cannot fall down steps or into a pool and that he can access toilets, classrooms, as needed. Looking at the need to install guide rails for blind or cerebral palsied children OR at relocating their classrooms; looking at complementary painting schemes or textured flooring to help low vision children to find their way around; Discussing why physically disabled children cannot safely be put with mentally disabled children who might intentionally hurt them – or do so without understanding what they are doing – or who might damage vital equipment like hearing aids or prostheses. (Dorah has an expensive stick-on nose but other children could have stick-on ears, wigs, glasses, hands or devices to use instead of hands or feet).

A classroom assistant cannot tackle structural dangers without support from a school principal and agreement that money will be spent to remove or circumvent problems, and that the money will be spent speedily. If there is a danger, it is now – not partway through the next year's budget. The assistant learns to be insistent upon safety matters, even at the risk of being unpopular.

Touch diaries

Some South African schools function on a seven day rotating system, the theory being that this prevents subjects that were taught on days like Friday or Monday (that might more regularly be public holidays) having less learning sessions than others. So instead the child has history e.g. on day 1, 3, and 6 of the seven-day schedule – meaning on Monday, Wednesday and Monday ... and then the new "day 1" starts on Wednesday... and the next new "day 1" starts on a Friday – continuing throughout the year in this

manner. This means that the school actually operates on a nine-day “week” with the “weekend” always occurring in different places!

In practice it is a disaster as the whole of society functions on learning from Monday to Friday and a different pattern of activities on Saturday and Sunday. Siblings often attend different schools, private therapists book appointments on normal weekdays and for the blind or low vision child it is hardest of all to establish the routine that he can relate to. If the child is lucky enough to attend a school that functions on a normal Monday to Friday week, it is very useful to make him or her a touch diary to help identify what day it is each day, to record the regular events in his life and also to record the new activities and personalities that affect him.

The classroom assistants were asked how, by just one item to touch, they could help Dorah to identify that they were referring: (1) to the regular classroom assistant and (2) that they were referring to Dorah’s mother.

As one was African and one was Caucasian, they realised that putting soft curly black hair on the page showed Dorah that they were referring to her assistant, and that by putting a small plait of Caucasian hair on the page referred to her mother.

The assistants had to explore other tactile symbols that could be used to explain every day activities – from toilet paper for “time to go to the lavatory”, to a sponge for “time to wash” to small stones for a “walk down a gravel path” and a plastic spoon for “time to eat.” It was far more complicated than they had thought at first and impressed upon them the need for the child to understand her routine.

Scent diaries

Scent diaries followed a similar principle. The assistants had to source objects that were safe, easy to obtain and free or cheap. There might be no particular logic in Monday being lemon day, Tuesday being lavender day and Wednesday being soap day, but if it helped to teach the child the days of the week and reinforced the understanding of timetable, that was enough.

Caning via Spilliken sticks

In learning the aids available to a blind child, again the classroom assistants had to get first hand experience. It is common knowledge that some blind people use a white cane to find their way around. It is not common knowledge what it feels like to try to identify what an object is, if one uses an artificial inert extension to the body. Blindfold an assistant or teacher, give them a “spilliken” stick (a 20 centimetre-long wooden stick used in child’s game – a wooden kebab skewer would do just as well) and ask the to identify a variety of objects just from feel, and they would not find it at all easy. The same applies, even if they are allowed to use fingers, to plastic replicas of everyday objects e.g. a plastic orange does not feel much like an orange, does not have the same weight and certainly doesn’t have the same smell as the real thing. By learning how difficult it is to

recognise things when blind, especially if one has no prior frame of reference and especially if one is trying to identify them at the end of a long stick, the assistant will teach the pupil more effectively and will choose learning aids more appropriately.

Toys

The assistants were shown a “hanging frame” designed by 12-year-old British school children for a disabled South African girl. Working on a similar principle to high-priced plastic frames made for babies – with music, squeaks and rattles, the 12 year olds designed a frame that could be adjusted for different height children to use whether lying, sitting or standing.

They took colourful curly cables (as used on telephone handsets) and attached them to metal bars with Velcro so that, if the child were left unattended while playing with the toy, he would not become entangled in the cable but that it would be pulled off the Velcro by the force of movement.

On one end of the cable, a series of different stimulating items/toys were hung. These were designed and made by the pupils.

The classroom assistants were set the same challenge. They had to think about small items that could be pulled off and swallowed, the overall safety of the toy in terms of sharpness and toxicity, and what it would teach the pupil.

They used sponge to make different shapes, sewed orange bags (the plastic mesh bags in which oranges are bought) on one side – or beads – or buttons. They filled the shapes with dried herbs or grated dried orange peel and made openings so that the interesting smelling substances could be replenished when they no longer had a smell. They tried out vanilla essence and lemon essence as a means of prolonging the scent of the toy.

They also tried to use old plastic and metal bottle tops, jam jar lids, corks, seeds, bells and other items to make noisy toys to hang from the same frame. There were a lot of design disasters before they made things that were safe, interesting and durable.

Physiotherapists

Classroom assistants met physiotherapists and learned what they do and why they are needed. They found a significant difference between the commitment of some that they met in private practice and some that they met in the government’s employ. The better physiotherapists showed how to increase the strength of a child’s stomach muscles, how to improve their walking posture, how to help them to walk, run, climb, somersault and jump. They showed the assistants how to look out for actions that a blind child in particular might avoid doing such as twisting her body to reach behind her or walking across an open space.

To understand the nature of a child's injury and the effect on diet and defecation; why a blind child can readily become constipated if she does not have enough basic walking exercise every single day.

Occupational therapists

The classroom assistants were introduced to occupational therapy. They looked at a child's agility, dexterity, and how it could be improved to give him or her more independence. From rolling and squeezing exercises with extra-squishy play dough on a tabletop to how thermoplastic is moulded to make prosthesis to hold paintbrushes, spoons, a toothbrush or a drumstick. They became aware of what help is possible even if most parents of disabled children might not know such items can be made and are, at least in theory, available in state hospitals.

The assistants again found a great difference in the willingness and attitude of private sector and public sector staff. They also realised that staff that were not interested in helping a disabled pupil can frustrate the child more by making her undertake exercises that are unchallenging and boring to her.

Speech therapists

Classroom assistants met speech therapists and hearing specialists and learned how a child can suffer mild to moderate hearing loss through use of antibiotics at the time of severe injury and surgery. They learned how the pupil's position in a classroom can ease the hearing problem (the disabled child should be at the front of the class) and how, if there is a lot of background noise, the hearing-impaired child may simply "switch off" because it is too hard to learn. The assistants learned that in addition to mouth-injured children finding certain sounds very hard or impossible to say, there are certain sounds that hearing-impaired children may not pick up at all (like sh, ch, th, ts). They also learned that some mouth-injured children could, with sufficient encouragement, find ways to compensate for sounds that their lips cannot form but that their throats can. They learned that it helps a hearing-impaired child if his hand is put on the assistant's throat as she speaks a new word. He picks up the word by listening, looking and by feeling the vibrations.

The assistants also learned the importance of a hearing-impaired child having separate time for learning in a quiet environment. Inclusion does not have to mean inclusion in every activity throughout the school day.

Empathy with the deaf

Assistants wore earplugs and tried to complete normal learning tasks. They tried to establish what a mild to moderate hearing loss felt like and also to try to establish what it would be like to learn if one was profoundly deaf. They realised that without the ability to sign and for someone to sign back, a deaf person is maybe more disabled than a blind person.

Developmental delay

The assistants were taught about some reasons for developmental it and the ways to overcome it – particularly by working as a team with the child’s family. They were taught about the dangers of using archaic systems of tests to classify children – and how such tests are regarded in other countries. They learned how to observe what a child means, wants, is trying to communicate – even if not with spoken language but maybe with body signs that are common to many children (crossed legs needing the toilet) or that are unique to that child (e.g. stamping on the floor to say “No”).

Videos

A variety of British Royal National Institute for the Blind videos were watched by the assistants.

Resources used in training courses to date, or to be used in the future are listed below:

All materials sourced through the Royal National Institute for the Blind in the UK (including some Australian items) are given a catalogue number.

CONCEPTS IN MATHS KIT

LC102

The RNIB Concepts in Maths Kits fills a large plastic (crate-size) box (with its lid used as a tray by the pupil) with different pre-primary mathematics concepts via objects to feel and count.

The packs are labelled alphabetically and have one or more laminated cards for them in a series of work exercises e.g. ordering for size – shortest, longest, biggest, smallest, middle sized. The colour concepts of certain exercises are only appropriate for some low vision children. They group objects by classification, sort for attributes e.g. shape or weight, compare textures, etc and have extension activities too that can use self-selected everyday materials. Not all the A3 “wallets” seemed to have the contents listed, but generally the kit is brilliant for individual or small class work. The kit cost some R3000 in 2002.

TALKING CALCULATOR

DH83

This can be used speaking “one plus two equals three” or can be used silently. It is good for a blind child or adult *with* fingers.

WIKKI STIX

LC49

Good for model making – similar to pipecleaners but better.

MOON WORD BUILDING KIT (48 point)
STAFFSMATHS MOON NUMBER KIT (48 point)

ZM17
ZM20

These letters on yellow plastic squares work a little like Scrabble letters. The largest point size was chosen because Dorah has no fingers but smaller point sizes are also available. Moon is a simpler language to learn than Braille and bears more resemblance to “normal” i.e. Roman, letters. It is not generally used in South Africa though.

Publications/Books catalogue

FOCUS ON FOUNDATION

ED282

This is a book to help crèche/play school/nursery teachers to integrate blind and low vision children into a group of “normal” preschoolers, but it is also a good simple introduction as to how to get to know and to work with blind children.

Sound provides the only motivation for a totally blind baby to reach out and search for a toy. A toy car may interest a blind child for the way its wheels spin under the hand rather than for the way it travels on the floor. A doll’s house will be experienced as a wooden or plastic box with interesting flaps and holes in it, rather than as a miniature house.

Blind children should handle and talk about as many manageable real things as possible. Try out a Pandora’s suitcase of real objects e.g. gum boots, wooden spoons, nylon pan cleaner, bicycle pump, balls of different textures and sizes, a comb, handbag, slippers, toothbrush and so on. Children will love rummaging through the suitcase.

The book is full of useful ideas from the need for a running commentary from a sighted adult as to what is happening to relevant speech, listening games, using the child’s name to replace the reassuring glance that one might give a sighted child and presenting positive images of blind children through stories told.

Of key importance, the book comments: *Visually impaired children respond better within an established consistent routine in an ordered environment.*

ONE OF THE CLASS

ED201

This loose-leaf ring folder has so many answers as to where to find or make equipment and resources for teaching blind children effectively. No longer should children be limited to certain subjects because materials do not exist to teach them Geography or German, Design or History.

As South Africa is in the midst of the HIV-Aids pandemic, the ideas even for sex education are down to earth but effective so long as the teachers themselves are not too coy. e.g. *Models can be creatively put together to explain certain processes. It is amazing what can be taught using a piece of tubing, a plastic beaker lined with play dough, and a peppercorn.*

As prices, suppliers and addresses may change over time, updates could be added in as needed.

From light probes to read the level of water in a beaker (for science for low vision pupils) to tactile overlays for metre sticks for measuring in maths, to large print, Braille or text on disk.

Prices are fairly frightening in African budgetary terms – R1270 for 200 sheets of swell paper (November 2002) but if that is what is needed to produce tactile diagrams, it should not just be on a wish list, but needs to be accepted by Education Department officials as essential. Spur wheels (from R130 to R410) are used in embossing tools on plastic embossing film (R150 for 100 sheets) to produce raised lines without turning the film over. Then there are talking thermometers and kitchen scales, tactile globes, peg boards and pegs, tactile protractors, embossed graph paper and information as to how to try to get certain books put into Braille.

Most of all, the folder proves, if there is a will there is a way.

PLAY IT RIGHT

ED214

Some thirty bright A4 pages of ideas for parents, carers, teachers and therapists on adapting and creating toys and games for visually impaired children with other disabilities. Children are likely to explore objects in ways that the designer never envisaged so safety is paramount – small parts that fall off with frequent use, should not be used. Think about what happens if the child wants to eat the toy or to throw it.

Sonic cordless doorbells help the visually impaired child to find a golf hole or cricket wicket. Soft toy squeakers can be bought separately and put under rugs to be found by sound or – as part of a party game – to be avoided. A squeezezy radio (made to look like a computer mouse!) changes station when squeezed. Shoes or satchels that have flashing lights when moved. Torches that flash when squeezed or other torches that operate in response to the sound of a hand clap. Car foot mats can be cut into tactile shape puzzles.

A dishwashing sponge on a handle can make a large “paint brush” with cycle handlebar grips to make it easier to hold and use. The book is an adult idea stimulator.

IMPROVING PROVISION FOR CHILDREN WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITY AND VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

ED174

This package consists of three booklets: **Framework for inspecting school provision for pupils with multiple disability and visual impairment.**
Developing whole school policies to meet the needs of pupils with multiple disability and visual impairment.
Supporting learning for pupils with visual impairment and multiple disability: technology and other resources.

These booklets should be an essential part of all teacher training in South Africa. They are well written and tackle subjects that would be equally useful for inclusion of pupils with other disabilities.

The books emphasise that “training for staff needs to be well-targeted and *supported by the school.*”

“*All staff need to be aware of the particular needs of children with multiple disability and visual impairment to maximise opportunities for developing interactive and independence skills in the wider community of the school.*”

There are some telling questions regarding the inspection of schools to see if they offer “Support, guidance and pupil welfare....”

e.g. “How is expertise shared to promote development and awareness in other members of staff?”

ONE OF THE FAMILY – SERIES	ED121
SOUND MOVES	ED181
MUSIC MOVES	ED163

“At the most basic level, loud sounds tend to be arousing, while quiet ones have a calming effect; high notes may engender tension, whereas low ones foster a feeling of repose; fast tunes have energetic connotations while slow ones are restful.”

The book talks about many aspects of music – from Braille and Moon music to talking scores. It is aimed at teachers, therapists and parents.

The book mentions the value of consistent use of songs and music for events. As the mother of a blind child whose cognitive abilities were regularly “written-off” by education officials, I laughed when I said “Good Morning” to her one day and she started la-la-ing “Happy Birthday”. I then remembered that at her crèche they had sung “Good Morning to you” set to the Happy Birthday tune, every morning. She used the song to greet me in response to my greeting – because she could not speak the words.

The idea of tracking pupils through the sounds of their day is a concept vital to inclusion of a blind child among sighted children. Noticing how noisy schools are and how it is difficult to attend selectively to a tangle of sounds, would be a new concept for many teachers. Many parents might tell children not to listen to the radio while they do homework (to minimal effect) but how many teachers recognise that the noise of the lawnmower outside the classroom cuts swathes through what the teacher is saying? How many of them think how noisy it is for chairs and tables to be scraped across floors – and even disturbing when there is no explanation of what is going on?

Receptive language develops before the capacity to express thoughts and feelings. Just listening is as valid a form of participation as any other.

ALL JOIN IN

ED137

The folder contains twenty-four songs and further variations, and a CD (and the musical notation – particularly for people with access to a piano or guitar).

The concepts and language introduced in the songs are aimed at visually impaired children and those with learning disabilities at early stages of development, but are also appropriate – and enjoyable - for all ages.

Youngsters may be language-impaired but their ability to handle musical information may nonetheless be intact. Throughout the set of songs, music is subservient to text. The rhythm of tunes reinforces the metrical symmetry of the language used and generally there are one or two notes per syllable. Key words are consistently allocated the same rhythm and where possible, melodic shape. This is intended to enhance verbal recognition and opens up the possibility of musical fragments acquiring symbolic meaning in their own right e.g. the tune of “goodbye” may come to convey the idea of parting.

Words rhyme where possible, fit regular metrical structures and use repetition to make language easy to remember and reproduce. The texts can be customised to use the names of pupils and different activities fitted to the songs.

It would be very useful to have South African teachers who are also musical, to translate songs into the Nguni tongues and Sotho languages to take this initiative further.

The musical styles on the CD include classical, jazz, pop, folk and Caribbean. A child can contribute through the most straightforward musical gesture – vocalising or tapping on a tambourine.

It is a wonderfully thought out project that would show users how much pleasure inclusion can be. Sadly most classrooms don't have a CD player but those that do, should acquire this folder and CD.

LISTENING TO STUDENTS

PR20390

This is a survey of the views of some older visually impaired students in the UK. Life does not get easier as they get older, but they still want to learn and they find learning a sociable activity as well. Transport availability and the cost of transport are major deterrents to getting out and about. Where classes are readily available, some teachers are daunted to have a blind person in the class and have to be put at their ease by the students. People who lost their sight suddenly, said that attending a course of study in anything, helped them to regain confidence.

GAMES FOR ALL OF US

ED027

This very positive publication from Australia's Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind has a series of activities for blind and sighted children learning together. The author feels that a balanced physical education programme should also include the occasional pursuit of victory, both as an individual and as a member of a group – contrary to the view that if people play to win, there are losers who become diminished as individuals and lose a sense of themselves. The book states that some competition enhances self-esteem and heightens peer group acceptance. The pictures and descriptions are easy to understand.

A “must” to all schools promoting inclusion. (Lending a copy to Hope School and to EP Baumann School sadly elicited no response at all!).

MODELS OF MAINSTREAMING

ED032

Supported mainstream provision: This service is characterised by a very well resourced support scheme in three mainstream schools. When the special school closed, its human and material resources were transferred to these schools together with most of the pupils.

One primary school has 12 visually impaired pupils supported by two teachers, a nursery nurse and three part-time ancillary workers who provide 85 hours a week between them. This paragraph, lifted from the book, clearly shows how not to upset parents, pupils and teachers by not losing skills and bonds between teachers and pupils, and demonstrates the high staff-pupil ratio needed for effective teaching. Inclusion in South Africa does not seem to have budgeted for this in 2002.

However the high initial costs of providing for a blind child in mainstream education become less prohibitive when shared among several pupils and the new educational service becomes more widespread.

Even in the UK though, in some instances the battle for inclusion versus residential care, was left to the individual parent. The book lists a variety of case studies of need, education and outcome for children of different abilities and backgrounds.

It also compares educational provision by different local authorities. Sometimes the attitude towards inclusion was positive but there were delays and difficulties in recruiting qualified staff.

The book states that a visually impaired child in a permanent classroom will need greater working and storage areas than sighted pupils. It explains the technology for vacuum-forming duplicators to produce Braille masters and the main methods for making tactile diagrams – though emphasising that these are time consuming and require great skill. The author also says that medical and educational professionals should work together to help visually impaired pupils.

SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE CLASSROOM

ED152

This Teacher Education Guide produced via UNESCO was produced as a source of ideas for teacher educators who want to improve teachers' skills in dealing with pupil diversity in mainstream schools. It was worked on, across the world, including in Kenya and Zimbabwe. Teacher education change is needed as the "usual" approach to educational difficulty works to the disadvantage of the children that it is meant to serve.

The book emphasises that parents have rights in relation to their children that must be respected as well as a unique and uniquely valuable contribution to their children's development that must be more effectively exploited by professionals.

Legislation is changing across the world e.g. Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) in the USA that insisted that state schools throughout the country should provide appropriate education for every school-age child, irrespective of the nature of the child's disability... usually in a regular classroom.

UNESCO said that an obstacle to improvement is that special education in some countries is still perceived as a charitable venture.

And the book states: Those with disabilities, who ironically have the greatest need of education, are the least likely to receive it.

UNESCO has produced a Resource Pack to educate teachers. A Spanish teacher responded to it: "I have learned that if we want to look for and find solutions to our pupils' problems we have to reflect – because the solution is in ourselves." Another said: "It was reinforced that most students can be integrated and that empathy, acceptance and good teaching strategies will allow for higher levels of active integration and growth for both the handicapped and non-handicapped, regardless of the medical label for the condition. I am going to try integrating more of my students and stop worrying about having all the answers before stressing to my colleagues that we will learn together (what an important lesson)."

TEACH YOURSELF TO SIGHT READ BRAILLE A WORKBOOK

ED093

So what is Braille? A written language of raised dots, based upon a block of six dots or dots and spaces. But how many, if any, of the general population can even write a b c in Braille? How many people know that a Braille sign can also be used for a single word – but not necessarily related to the use as a single letter. E.g. x is a series of four dots – two on one horizontal line, then there is in effect a horizontal line left empty, underneath, then there are the same two dots on a horizontal line, directly underneath the first two dots. This symbol for the letter "x" can also be used to show the word "it" but it cannot be added to an h to make hit – that has to be written out with representation of all three letters in Braille.

Sounds confusing? In the end, maybe not so much more complex than starting to read music (conventional musical notation that is, not Braille music).

There are upper contractions like ch, gh, sh, th, even ing, ble, and lower contractions like be, con, dis, com as well as Braille punctuation. Children who are used to Braille even invent their own abbreviations. For the sighted teacher of a bright blind child, this Australian-published book is a good introduction to an essential science.

CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN THE MAINSTREAM SETTING

ED187

This book published in the UK in 1999 should be compulsory reading for all people undergoing teacher training, if inclusion is to work. The increased incidence of people going blind through HIV-Aids should be reason enough to prepare teachers for visually impaired pupils.

This section on Learning Support Assistants (i.e. Classroom Assistants) is quoted from the book.

Where there is good practice, Learning Support Assistants will work under the supervision of a qualified teacher of the visually impaired but in some instances they may have to support children with little direct assistance. Opportunities for professional training of LSAs are limited so it is important that they are included in school based in-service training. Collaboration between teachers and LSAs is essential and they need to be involved in curriculum planning, so that they can:

Advise on any area of potential difficulty

Prepare and adapt materials well in advance of the lesson being taught

Check out places to be visited for particular hazards

Arrange for assistive technology to be in the room if necessary.

Such discussions ensure that the responsibility for “teaching” the pupil is not left to the LSA and that the pupil with visual impairment does not become “dependent” upon one adult and isolated from normal contact with their peers.

The willingness of individual teachers to understand the challenges facing children and young people with a visual impairment is a key factor in successfully meeting their needs.

The book then explains some causes of visual impairment, low vision aids, classroom position and working position, display of work, floor covering, lighting, glare, outdoor pathways, accessing the curriculum, handwriting, spelling, listening, touch, Braille writing, mobility and orientation, daily living skills, the importance of early education.

CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS: A PARENTS GUIDE

ED171

This book, published in 1996, is American-based but has reassuring information for most parents about what to expect. “Specialists in education believe that children with visual impairments follow a different sequence in development to that of sighted children.” It says that while children with visual impairments seem behind their peers, it is not

surprising. They don't have the incidental learning of a normal child who notices lots of things happening beyond what is expected to be the focus of his attention. Eighty per cent of learning in sighted people is through vision. But the emphasis on early intervention is from another world. In South Africa such luxury does not exist, let alone "Individualised Education Programmes" with well thought out Academic goals, Functional goals and Adaptive goals. Just the idea of a teacher taking such interest in the individual child is a wonderful dream in the developing world. And the idea that parents might want to learn Braille to be able to communicate better with their children also seems novel.

The glossary and reading list are very useful, the contact addresses all USA-based. The child's life is discussed from birth up til vocational training and sex education. There is a very useful chapter on Multiple Disability.

Fifty to 60 per cent of children with visual impairments have other disabilities as well. Disabilities commonly associated with visual impairments include cerebral palsy and other movement disorders, hearing impairment and mental retardation.

"Each child with multiple disabilities is unique. Each child has her own temperament and her own set of experiences and may be affected in different ways by a medical condition or physical disability. This makes it almost impossible to predict how much any child will learn and what she will be able to do as an adult. For parents of children with multiple disabilities, facing this uncertainty may be the greatest challenge. No doctor, therapist or educator can predict just what to expect for the future, and coordinating information and experiences from many sources may sometimes seem overwhelming. Ultimately, you will become the expert on your own child."

The section on Communication Disorders is useful in explaining the need for referents – *Development of language depends on the child's awareness of referents – the objects, events and people to be talked about.* Clearly all professionals, friends and family would have to co-operate on the same vocabulary and phrases to teach a child new subjects.

TACTILE GRAPHICS

ED023

Brilliant, wonderful, but where to get all the components in Africa, let alone afford the staff to make the pictures, let alone find people skilled enough and interested enough to make them? It feels as if one could include a blind child in any ability class, if only there was an assistant/technician clever enough to make tactile graphics to go with all the subjects.

Seeing how a blind child illustrates action e.g. a mother waving has four arms – two up in the air and two pointing downwards – helps get the picture maker into a different mindset. Bouncing a ball – shows several balls; raised line drawing of a man walking, shows his previous steps as well as his current ones. Fast moving wheels ... imagine taking a photo of traffic on time delay and the effect is the same.

The simplest equipment explained is the rubber pad drawing board, covered with a thin sheet of plastic. Draw round a blind child's foot and ask her what the image is. She can answer: "my foot". But you explain that her foot is still on her leg. Ask the question again; probably get the same answer; then explain the raised image that is the same size and shape as her foot is a picture of her foot. *At last she knows the abstract idea of what a picture is.*

HELEN AND TEACHER

ED068

As a child of five, I read a simple story about Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan and it gave me the basic belief that anything is possible if one tries hard enough and cares enough. What I did not realise until nearly 40 years later when I effectively adopted both a multiple disability girl and her "cause", was how Helen Keller was helped was because her family was wealthy and because of the remarkable personality of Anne Sullivan.

Money can buy the best care in the world. That option is not available to most families to whom a disabled child is born or who comes into their care in some other way.

ODYESSEY NOW

ED151

Wow! Imagine taking children on Odysseus's journey. Imagine making the concepts of mythical creatures and storms and fear and joy of a complex story alive for blind children, even children with other learning problems. It is an eye-opener for teachers let alone pupils – proof that anything can be done if the educator is excited and energetic about his job.

SENSORY COOKERY

ED156

The book is aimed not so much at blind or low vision children but at mentally disabled children. Nonetheless it has plenty of practical ideas for simple recipe following and food and drink preparation.

By presenting "real recipes" it also introduces the parent and the teacher to ways in which to communicate other than the written word or one-dimensional pictures. Making jammy toast as a recipe on five large black cards would have a slice of bread glued on the first one (smell); then a blunt knife (touch/feel); then for the child with some sight, a picture of a toaster (it says "switch on the toaster when the card is shown, to hear the noise"); then a card with a margarine tub (smell); then a card with a jam pot (smell).

If children can grow their own herbs in the classroom and then put them in the cooking, and then eat the food – what an effective and enjoyable learning tool that would be.

SENSORY SCIENCE – NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR VERY SPECIAL PEOPLE.

ED048

While aimed primarily at mentally disabled children, there are aspects of this book that are very useful for blind children. “There is no way in which to understand the world without first detecting it through the radar net of our senses.” The approach is refreshing as it relates directly to the pupil – if he wants to learn lying on his side on the carpet, that’s ok. They need to see (where possible) or hear, feel, move, taste or smell what they are doing. They might need an eye right up to a spring to see it uncoil – a nose inside a bag of peat – an ear next to a vibrating drum with peas bouncing on it – hands dragged through a mucky bowl of pond water and weed. They may need physical prompting and someone to check a hearing aid is in or glasses are on, or a splint fitted correctly so that the child can reach out. Time should be allowed for anything to happen, choices to be made and repetition as needed for maximum effect. It goes to the core of learning.

SEX EDUCATION AND SENSUALITY

ED157

This is aimed at mentally disabled children but it is also difficult to teach blind children about sexuality as they cannot look at pictures and it would be considered highly inappropriate for them to touch other children’s genitals to learn about the opposite sex.

At one SA crèche for blind children, teachers complained that a five year old was masturbating and they suggested that she had a vaginal infection. They had to first learn that the child was actually indicating that she wanted to go to the toilet, had no infection and was not “playing with herself”. And they had to learn that if she was masturbating, it is a normal activity for a child rather than “challenging behaviour”. The book encourages educators teaching children about body parts to refer to genitals and buttocks as easily as they refer to noses and hands, from a young age. It encourages ways to teach appropriate touching of others (a hug, a pat) and to also explain social taboos in their simplest form. A down to earth book tackling a difficult subject.

HOW TO THRIVE NOT JUST SURVIVE

ED060

This is a very practical book that starts with basic daily living skills such as eating, dressing, toileting and goes through learning to be independent, etiquette, listening and comprehending and leisure time. The contacts are USA-specific but the rest of the information could be useful anywhere.

REHABILITATING BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE

ED120

This book discusses congenital blindness, instant blindness through accident and gradual blindness through age, ill health, etc. It follows a psychological approach and looks at the effects of the disability on the whole family. While mentioning that there will be increased incidence of blindness related to HIV-Aids, it stereotypes the syndrome as a problem affecting homosexuals and drug users – something that is far from the truth in Africa. There are some useful references and contacts (primarily for people in the United Kingdom) and a highly scientific approach to how the eye and the brain are connected, as

well as useful discussion of depression associated with vision loss. The author points out that once someone is visually impaired, this is considered their sole or primary problem and other health or psychological issues are generally disregarded, even by professionals meant to help them. For the field worker there is also a useful chapter on the signs of burnout and how to avoid it. This could apply to almost anyone working in public health or charity work, particularly in South Africa.

**GUIDELINES AND GAMES FOR TEACHING EFFICIENT
BRAILLE READING**

ED091

This has interesting discussion of methods to teach reading that would also apply to conventional letters, and details of games to make learning to read more fun. The speed of reading with one hand or two, the number of words that can be absorbed through different techniques, ergonomics and technology; the number of words that can be heard on an audiotape (and the ability of the child to retain information that she has only listened to and not actively read), etc. What is painfully apparent in the book though, is how resource-rich the USA is in equipment, teachers and well-educated volunteers and how very hard it would be for many people in Africa to ever learn Braille, let alone obtain the equipment and books needed. The pre-school learning systems discussed could, however, be used where there are relatively few resources.

**COMPETENCY BASED CURRICULUM FOR TEACHERS
OF THE VISUALLY HANDICAPPED**

ED064

This compiles the results of a national (USA) study from residential schools for the blind to neighbourhood community schools that by 1977 included 70 per cent of all American visually-impaired pupils. The focus on inclusion allowed new careers to develop to support the public school class teacher. They would receive support from itinerant teachers, teacher-consultants and special education teachers.

The book states that *Teachers of visually handicapped pupils need competency in: Understanding of exceptionality as a personal, psychological and social problem; Knowledge of education programmes to meet the needs of all exceptional children with specific focus on visual handicap and an understanding of the relationship of specialised services to general educational services for all children;*

Knowledge of and skill in the use of tools and procedure in diagnosis, guidance and counselling;

Skill in interpreting local, provincial and national law affecting administration of services;

Familiarity with resources, aids and materials and skill in adapting, modifying and creating the needed teaching aids;

Understanding of the curriculum and capacity to adapt it into a programme for blind pupils;

Understanding of learning and how it occurs, and what problems are inherent in learning for the visually handicapped;
Clear perception of interpersonal relations and the role demanded of the teacher in establishing positive communication with blind or visually handicapped people and providing interpretation to other professionals who function in the total programme;
Insight to understand the communication process as it functions within the family, the community and society at large, when dealing with problems related to the visually handicapped;
Ability to identify valid existing research affecting the needs of and programmes for the visually handicapped as well as an understanding of the problems yet unsolved and awaiting further study.

The book goes on into far more specific skills. The layout is dull, the information vital (except the computer-style printouts at the end) – obtain it and persevere with it. In the South African context it is abundantly clear that teacher training does not yet touch on many of the skills needed – even those needed for “normal” pupils.

FACING THE CROWD

ED062

This is about managing other people’s insensitivities to your disabled child. James Partridge (a Briton who lost his face in a car fire) told me that he felt able to cope with the Third World after a certain stage of facial reconstruction because there were so many more disfigured people obvious in a poor society than in a country like the UK. People found his appearance less shocking because they were used to disfigurement from disease and injury.

Conversely though, with my own disfigured child, I find the poorest people are often also the least educated and they are remarkably cruel to someone who is ugly – especially where people still believe in witchcraft or where they think that a damaged child is a punishment from God.

South Africa e.g. has a high level of cleft palates in children, due in part to dietary deficiencies in the poorest people and in part to a public health system that cannot help timeously. There is no help readily available for these families and translation of books like this one into Zulu and Sesotho are long overdue. They would not be commercially viable but they are needed.

The book is aimed at parents but it would be so wonderful if all the people who shower one with clichés or hollow praise could read just some of the parents’ comments e.g. *When I hear “I think you’re marvellous,” I think to myself “Yeah well – that let’s you off the hook, doesn’t it. Because I’m so bloody marvellous, you don’t have to do anything.”*

Another quote from the book struck a particular chord as it dealt with: *Difficulty with relatives*. A family with a disabled child and two normal children, was asked not to bring any of the children to an extended family celebration. When tackled about the reason, the relatives admitted that they did not want the discomfort of having to see the disabled child there – and so the whole family unit declined the invitation. I have had my family and my friends indirectly or directly, ask me not to attend a social event with my disabled child. The days of lepers, bells and cries of “unclean, unclean” are still with us.

THERE’S NEVER AN END TO LEARNING ED160

A BLIND CHILD IN MY CLASSROOM ED016

A VISION SHARED ED184

SPOTLIGHT ON SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ED143

MOVEMENT, GESTURE AND SIGN ED139

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: ASSESSMENT LAW ED153

AND PRACTICE

“Children with special needs will often become disturbed and upset or regress to a degree if their future is uncertain.”

WHEN IT’S HARD TO SEE ED190

AIDS AND VISION LOSS ED070

CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS ED161

And finally, a report from disability specialist Anita Madacs (that was sadly ignored by EP Baumann school); followed by one of the many comprehension exercises carried out by the classroom assistants undergoing training; and then an article by Sue Philpott from the wonderful South African magazine Children First.

Dorah Mokoena at E P Baumann Primary School
By Anita Madacs, Disability Specialist, November 2001.

Dorah is a very special child and what the school is undertaking in taking her as a pupil is a huge step for disabled South African children. It is particularly special because Dorah doesn't have to be uprooted from her home environment, which is psychologically very important for her, but which also relieves a big potential burden on the state. Dorah only has to be supported for some five hours a day rather than the 24 hours a day in a boarding school with the accompanying cost of staff, food, accommodation and her sometimes-complex medical needs.

Nonetheless teaching a child like Dorah is expensive and extra support has to be provided to the school in terms of equipment, a classroom assistant, training for teaching and supplementary staff, and access to occupational and speech therapists as necessary.

This could be made more financially viable by a careful look at every other pupil in the school because often a specialist will notice they need help when the rest of the children or staff have become accustomed to their small but improvable disability.

The school can pioneer the way for children like Dorah and benefit from its work being in the spotlight, either for awareness among the general public or among education professionals. EP Baumann is already a well-regarded school but extra status can only help.

The normal learners must not be disadvantaged by children like Dorah attending the same school, so this will help shape preparations for special pupils.

It would be easier for particular primary schools to focus on admitting one type of disability: e.g. EP Baumann to choose the visually impaired; another school to choose hearing-impaired; another school to choose physical disability such as wheelchair-bound pupils.

School buildings need to be adjusted to the needs of the learners e.g. low vision children can benefit from handrails and bright painted lines or textures for guidance. Dorah could easily fall from the walkway to the toilets but it is not impossible for her to learn to walk there by herself, so long as she is not pushed by other pupils.

Hearing-impaired children can easily become an isolated group as it takes quite some time to teach other pupils and teachers how to sign and often people are not very willing to learn. Autistic children or those who are hyperactive or have psychological problems can be entertaining for other pupils because of their "funny" behaviour, but to be the butt of people's humour is not appropriate for disabled children.

Most seriously handicapped children also have some sort of mental obstacle or learning difficulty because of their perception of the world being impeded in some way. Each case is individual and can be largely overcome with sufficient "vision" from the teaching staff.

Visually impaired children like Dorah ideally need a separate group within a class, to allow one-to-one teaching. Special equipment and staff are essential for their inclusion or partial inclusion. They can work with the normal pupils in activities like dancing, singing, some sports and art and should not be totally separated from the normal running of the school.

The other children gain because they learn how to adapt to children with special needs and how to help them. They become used to disability - and some ten per cent of the population is disabled, so it is a preparation for life. Some pupils may even choose a career in helping handicapped people after contact with a child like Dorah.

Inclusion is a humane solution for parents who don't want to put their children in a boarding school, far away from their loved ones. Disabled children placed in boarding schools are excluded from society and lose the chance to live a full life, to become full people with quality of life.

Dorah has school friends and family, siblings and pets; she goes shopping with her Mum, pushing the shopping trolley and listening to her Mum talk about getting bread and dog food, smelling the fruit section of the shop when her Mum talks about buying bananas. Dorah occasionally attends concerts, films, even ballet. When she goes to a concert, her mother takes her to feel the cello

vibrate. When she goes to a ballet, she can hear the music, feel the vibrations as feet hit boards, see the bright lights and sense the performance through the audience reaction.

Dorah goes out for a milkshake and knows it is "going out" - a treat with the family. Dorah also walks with her Mum through squatter camps and hospitals, during the course of her mother's work. In the places where she is well-known she is picked up by countless people who know her name and give her hugs; where Dorah is not known to the community, she hears her Mum explain what happened and why people should be careful.

All these day-to-day interactions would be denied to a child put into a special boarding school. For Dorah to attend EP Baumann, with proper assistance and facilities, and also to remain a part of her family, is the best combination a child like Dorah could have.

Anita Madacs, Teacher of blind and disabled children, trained in Hungary.

Inclusion of disability – training programme.

Assessment: Communication

1. Which of the following list are forms of communication? Answer Yes, No or Sometimes.

- A. Letter-writing
- B. Talking
- C. Singing
- D. Waving
- E. Sniffing
- F. Laughing
- G. Jumping
- H. Sitting
- I. Crossing arms
- J. Dancing
- K. Praying

2. Name any two barriers you can think of, to communication.

- A.
- B.

3. Can there be communication if only one person is in the room?

4. How does a newborn baby communicate hunger to his mother?

5. Explain how a child can show she is afraid, just through touch.

6. If a child cannot speak, how can she communicate (show) happiness to another person, just by using her face?

7. How does Dorah show she is happy?

8. If a baby cries, does it mean that he is tired, is in pain, uncomfortable, too hot, too cold, or something else? Explain your answer. (you can write on the other side of the paper if need be).

9. If you want Dorah to do something, should you say:

A. "Dorah, do this..." or

B. "Do this, Dorah..."

Explain your answer.

10. List five sounds that Dorah recognises and that are part of her every-day routine.

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

11. List every exercise that Dorah does, in the correct order.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

15.

17.

18.

19.

11A. Explain why Dorah does these exercises.

12. If you guide a blind child in a place that she does not know, do you take her by the arm, walk beside her, walk in front of her, or walk behind her with a hand pushing her shoulder?

13. Can Dorah smile or show surprise with her mouth?

14. Can Dorah use her arms to show that she does not want to do something? Explain.

14A. Why does Dorah “twiddle” her hands and “blow-up” her stomach?

15. Monday – Rosemary

Tuesday - Oregano

Wednesday – Thyme

Thursday – Lemon Verbena

Friday – Mint

This is a sensory timetable by smell. All the herbs mentioned could be available for most of the South African school year. Now write a list of different tastes that are not expensive and could also easily be provided through most of the school year, to identify the day of the week.

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

16. If you want to teach Dorah to jump with her legs and arms out like a four-pointed star, how would you get her to understand this posture?

16A. If you want to teach Dorah to jump with her legs touching each other all the time, how would you teach her this posture?

17. If the class follows this routine: Sitting on the carpet, singing. Learning the Alphabet. Learning Lifeskills. Playtime. Learning about Nature (plants, animals, etc). Playtime. Learning about Weather. End of School. How would you teach Dorah that EACH of these new activities is beginning?

18. What does Dorah do with her legs to show that she wants to go to the toilet?

18A. Does she have any other way of showing with her body that she wants the loo?

18B. Does she use any word or sound to show that she wants to go to the bathroom?

19. What two words does Dorah use to show that she is hungry?

19A. Does Dorah speak words for chocolate or bananas? If yet, what are they?

20. If you tell Dorah that you are giving her a drink, what does she do with her “hands”?

20A. What word does Dorah use for drink?

21. If you ask Dorah to nod her head, she can do this. Does she understand that it means “yes”?

21A. Dorah has two spoken words for “Yes”. What are they?

22. How would you make a touch-diary to show Dorah that she is:

- A. Going to do an exercise with her blanket
- B. Going to wash her hands with soap.
- C. Going to see her mother
- D. Going to see her classroom assistant
(This requires a symbol that Dorah can feel that represents the activity or the person.)

Why Teachers need to work with Parents of disabled pupils.

Sue Philpott of The Disability Action Research Team (DART) says that children do best at school when families take a close interest in their education. This is because families are the most important people in their lives. It is extremely important for the child that other significant people in their life should understand and respect his/her parents.

In many cases, however, there are not good relationships between teachers and families of disabled pupils. Some parents may be reluctant to contact the educators in case they are thought to be interfering, or because they have had a bad experience at school. This problem may be compounded by the unwillingness of teachers to welcome pupils with disabilities into the school. Nevertheless, parents and grandparents are likely to be the people who know the child best. They are a good source of advice for teachers and they are the child's main supporters. Teachers need to see parents as a resource, not as a burden.

Relationship between parent and teacher

Parents and educators are the most important adults in any child's life. If these important people are fighting, or not agreeing on the things they should teach the child, s/he may become confused. This is true for all children, but even more so for disabled children.

The relationship between a parent and their disabled child may be influenced by many factors. For example:

- Parents are still mourning the loss of their dream child and getting to know and love their real child.
- Parents may have difficulties in bonding with their child because of specific impairments – such as a difficulty with hearing or speaking.
- Parents are often blamed for the child's disability, which is seen as a punishment for their wrongdoing. This may make it difficult for them to love the child. Often the parent and child form a close relationship and stand together against the outside world.
- A child with a disability may need a great deal of support and care; a parent may find it hard to trust another person to give proper care to the child.

- When a parent brings their child to a school, it is often the first time that they experience the reaction of other parents to their child. This can be very traumatic for them and they might experience grief all over again.
- Parents may be very concerned about their child's behaviour and fear that the educator will blame them or think that they have failed as parents.

Any learning programme for disabled pupils is more successful if parents and teachers work together. For example, if an educator teaches a child to feed himself, he will make faster progress if he practices at home. However, if the parents feed the child at home, he will take longer to learn. Parents need to know what the educator is doing at school and what they can do to help. Continuous learning and consistency between home and school greatly assist the learner to develop and master new skills.

Support for parents and parents' organisations

Many parents are struggling to cope with their disabled child. It is critical that they receive support in this, not judgement or criticism. They need a shoulder to cry on; they need teachers who can listen, understand and support them in the difficulties they face. This support needs to be based on empathy and respect of parents by educators.

Teachers also need to support and affirm parents' organisations. Sometimes parents work together to set up Day Care Centres to provide basic stimulation for their disabled children. In doing so, they need help from volunteers and from physio-, occupational and speech therapists to advise them on the development of children with disabilities. Sometimes parents also set up income-generating groups, which provide social support as well as a source of income to the family.

In the rural area of Ndwedwe, disabled children were suffering greatly due to the lack of basic services. A group of parents took the initiative to start the Ninikhona Day Care centre, so that the children could be brought together. In this way they were able to look after the children and to provide the necessary exercises and movements for those children who needed them. The Department of Health and the Disabled Children's Action Group (DICAG) provided training for the parents in running the day care centre and in teaching specific children. For example, they were taught how to feed a child who cannot close her mouth and how to prevent drooling. Although there has been great difficulty in obtaining food and teaching materials on a regular basis, the day care centre has been a very important source of support for parents and has also enabled the children to become more independent.

Sharing of information

As the child's primary caregivers, the families of children with disabilities know them extremely well. They know how the child has developed and when different milestones have been reached (often in comparison to other siblings). They know their child's strengths and weaknesses, their joys and disappointments. Based on this experience the intuition or "gut feeling" of parents needs to be respected. Teachers know the child in a

different context. Their knowledge may be based on their observation of his/her academic and social skills.

Sharing of information between teacher and parents is critical, as it enables each to build on what the learner can do at home and at school. For example, it is important for a teacher to know if a learner has a hearing impairment, so that they can make sure that they always speak clearly and loudly, facing the learner. If they are not aware of this, the teacher may interpret a learner's lack of response (e.g. she does not answer a question) as disobedience or disrespect. Both parent and educator need to have a consistent approach in terms of discipline.

Services and facilities

The support required includes practical services and facilities. This may come from a range of different sectors. For example, a child may need to obtain a birth certificate or an identity document from Home Affairs, in order to obtain a Care Dependency Grant from the Department of Social Welfare. Devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, or hearing aids may also be required in order to enable learners to be independent or to be mobile.

Barriers to good relationships

Reasons why there are often not good relationships between educators and parents of disabled children.

Teachers think:

“What do parents know – they have nothing to teach us!”

“We are too busy to talk to parents.”

The belief that children with disabilities cannot really be helped to learn.

Reluctance to have a learner with a disability in their class.

Fear of the unknown.

A tendency for educators to be working for money, and not for the love of children.

Parents think:

“It is the educator's job. They get paid for it, so why should we get involved with education?”

“Schools frighten me, I don't feel welcome there. I'd rather stay at home.”

Reluctance of some parents to take responsibility for the learning of their children.

Wanting someone also to take responsibility for their child.

Communication problems:

No telephones, difficulties with transport, no suitable times to meet.

School policies:

Some schools restrict parent involvement to fundraising.

Roles for parents

There are some very specific roles that parents can play in support of their child's education. For example:

- *Parents as activists/advocates*

Parents can play an important role as activists or advocates for better facilities for their children. Some parents petition their local community or local government for the rights of their children to be protected. In one community, a group of parents approached a local taxi organisation to provide transport for their children to a nearby school. In another, parents lobbied for a local school to extend the facilities on the playground, so that they would be suitable for disabled children.

- *Parents as organisers of services*

In many areas there are no facilities for disabled children. Some parents have started their own centres where their children can go during the day. The centres also act as the channels through which other resources are obtained. At the Sizameleni Day Care Centre in Inanda (25km outside of Durban), parents approached a social worker to come from Durban to assist parents with applications for Care Dependency Grants. This greatly increased the parents' chances of obtaining the grant, as they no longer had high transport costs and long queues to contend with.

- *Parents as general helpers and fundraisers*

Many schools need the help of parents for tasks such as maintaining the gardens and buildings and assisting on outings. Some schools have also used parents as class aides to assist specific learners in the classroom. Some parents of the Down Syndrome Association have provided a class assistant to individual learners at their own cost. However, in their experience, this has only been successful when this assistant has received some training. This is also particularly unfair on parents and pupils that cannot afford such help though.

Many parents have also assisted in fundraising for schools, but some feel that they would like to have more say in the management and budget allocation of the school. In one school, learners were told to pay 50c every week for a term. Parents later discovered that this money was used to pay for food and alcohol for a party for the teachers. They were extremely angry that they had not been consulted about this decision.

- *Parents as committee members*

When school authorities, educators and parents work together on the School Governing Body it helps them to get to know each other better. It also enables them to plan and work collectively for the benefit of all the learners. They can agree on joint aims and discuss problems and solutions. In order for this to work well, it is important to build a spirit of openness where the participation of all members is encouraged. Those with portfolios should include parents of learners with disabilities who have vision and commitment to the work of the school.

Strategies for working together

Just as schools need to provide a welcoming and inclusive approach to all learners, they need to be welcoming and inclusive of all parents. The best thing a teacher can do is to get to know the parents and establish ways to keep regular contact. This can be difficult for busy parents or busy teachers, but in the long term a good parent-educator relationship can be a great timesaver. It can be one of the main factors in helping the educator cope with a learner who experiences barriers to learning.

Some parents, however, may be more willing than others to become involved. Start with those who are willing and use them to encourage others to join in. Here are some ideas of how parent-educator partnerships can be strengthened:

1. Send a letter to the parents at the beginning of the year giving a telephone number and informing them about ideal times when they can contact educators. Let each educator set-aside time each week when she is free to talk to parents who come to the school or phone her. This is important because parents and educators often struggle to make contact when they need to discuss urgent issues e.g. change in the medication of an epileptic child, a change in home circumstances that affect the child
2. Encourage teachers to make at least one home visit a year to get to know the child's home and family. This enables the educator to see how the child copes at home and what support is provided there. After a visit, the educator usually understands the learner, his/her parents and family better and the parents have more confidence to talk to the teacher when they have problems.
3. A school-home message book in which parents and teachers (not just class aides) can write regular messages reporting on the events of the day, special occasions or circumstances, requests and queries. If parents cannot read, or if the teacher is too busy to write messages, she can use picture stamps. (e.g. A smiley face can be used to indicate that the child was happy at school, a sad face to indicate that they were upset or unhappy. A busy bee can be used to indicate that the child has worked hard).
4. Regular meetings with the parents can be a special time to talk about the child's work and progress and ways in which educators and parents can work together. It is important to have interviews when the learner is making good progress. Often schools only call parents when there are problems and parents are frightened to come to school because of this. Parents and educators need to meet regularly to plan together, so that they can set realistic and attainable goals for the learner.
5. Regular written reports on the learner's progress are sent to the parents every term.
6. Class or school meetings can be a time for parents to meet with the teacher of their child. This can be a time for the educator to tell the parents more about what and how she is teaching the learners and other general information about health, child

development. Individual parents can be invited to the child's class, so that they can see the teaching methods being used.

7. A systematic way to record information on the teacher-parent relationship. E.g. educators have a special page in the pupil's file where they note the date when they had an important discussion with the parents and the information gained.
8. Invite the whole family to special occasions at the school. At particular events, such as Christmas, farewell parties, sports days, open days, and concerts, create opportunities for the whole family to come to the school. This is especially important for families of learners with disabilities, because the whole family is often involved with supporting them in many different ways and they need support and information from the school.
9. Arrange a joint workshop between educators and parents. Initially, they should work in different groups to discuss their different roles and expectations, then these could be shared with each other.

Zandile Hlophe had a child who had an infection of his left ear. When she took him for treatment, the doctor told her to tell his teacher. She was very reluctant to do so, fearing that her child may be excluded if the educator is aware that he cannot hear properly.

Zandile says: "Sometimes educators don't communicate with parents – they just chase the child away. If a parent is too scared to come to school, the educator should go to the home and explain what is happening. The parent may then have a chance to explain how it started. Then they can both see what to do about the problem."

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Useful KwaZulu Natal contacts:

Zandile Hlongwa of the Disabled Children's Action Group (DICAG) and Dee Khuzwayo and Barbara Higgins of the Downs Syndrome Association (South Africa).

This section of the website will be updated from time to time. Please also see: Dorah Exercises; Schools Guide; Gauteng Schools.