**BLINDSA**

**Education Seminar: The South African Experience and Challenges**

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My intention is to provide an overview of the challenges faced by learners with visual impairments in accessing basic education in South Africa. While the information that I shall convey may create the impression of an Everest of obstacles, I hope that I will also be able to stimulate a discussion on modes of overcoming or at least chipping away at these obstacles.

I have benefited a great deal from *Left in the Dark*, a report which was prepared by Tim Fish Hodgson and Silomo Khumalo at SECTION27.

At the heart of the education crisis for visually impaired learners is a lack of interest at government level. This lack of interest appears to be informed, whether intentionally or not, by an unequal or discriminatory approach to people with disabilities.

In the case of visually impaired learners, the inequality operates on two levels: First, there is the failure to treated visually impaired learners with the same concern and attention as sighted learners – this is equality of principle. Second, there is the failure to appreciate that visually impaired learners require different things in order to enjoy the same measure of dignity and well-being as sighted learners – this is substantive equality.

Out of school learners

The distressing thing about starting with the statistics in the case of visually impaired children is that there are no statistics. There is no concrete idea of the number of visually-impaired children in this country. We have statistics only on the number of learners in schools. However, it is estimated that there are thousands who are not in school, and who should be. We call these “out of school learners”.

Working then on the estimates, the DBE estimates that there are over half a million out of school learners with disabilities generally. Of this, it is estimated that a vast majority of their number are visually impaired. Considering the fact that only an estimated 3,500 visually impaired learners are in school, this means that the vast majority of visually impaired learners are not even in the education system to begin with.

The majority of out of school learners live in rural areas and come from poor families.

To place out of school learners in school requires advocacy at a grassroots level, and addressing economic imbalances through upliftment and through policy challenges. Many parents in far flung parts of South African are simply not aware of the learning needs of and opportunities for visually impaired children.

If that hurdle is overcome, we must bear in mind that these same parents are often very poor. Poverty is a barrier to accessing schools for visually impaired learners – more so than it is for sighted learners: All learners seeking to enroll at public schools are entitled to apply for school fee exemptions if they are poor. However, there is no mechanism for hostel fee exemptions. Most visually impaired learners need to stay in hostels because of the sparseness of suitable schools.

For example, a blind learner from Manguzi, northern KwaZulu-Natal will be expected to attend the school for blind learners in his province. This school is Arthur Blaxall School for the Blind in Pietermaritzburg. However, Arthur Blaxall is almost 500 kilometres away from Manguzi. This means that the learner is required to be a long-term boarder at the school, and is liable for hostel fees. We must also consider that Manguzi is in the third-poorest district in South Africa. It is therefore very likely that this learner’s parents will not be able to afford hostel fees.

In these circumstances, which are not rare, many learners find themselves out of school.

Assuming that both the challenge of raising awareness around schooling for visually impaired children and the fee exemption system are addressed, we must consider the schools to which learners are granted access.

Quality of schooling

The public education system for visually impaired learners is falling apart.

It has not yet fallen apart due to the small, dedicated component of teaching and administrative staff at each of South Africa’s 22 schools for the blind.

The staff do not, however, received any meaningful support from their education departments.

In *Left in the Dark*, SECTION27 identified the major problem areas for visually impaired learners in schools. They painted a picture of a wholly compromised education system in which it is a miracle that anyone succeeds. Introducing the report, Zak Yacoob writes “*It is of course true, that in the absence of significant urgent measures, some exceptional children with disabilities may well miraculously come through the system and make a success of their lives. This is not because of the education they had received, but despite having had no real quality education.*”

The issues affecting visually impaired learners include the absence of textbooks, a lack of assistive devices, inappropriate staff provisioning, inadequate teacher training, dangerous infrastructure, sham assessments and an inaccessible curriculum.

We address only a few of these issues now.

Textbooks

Braille textbooks do not exist. We have consulted with teachers and principals who have informed us that promises were made directly to them in the past. Similarly, promises have been made to other stakeholders to put in place a plan to develop the national Braille production capacity. This has not been done.

Assistive devices

As with textbooks, there are insufficient Perkins machines and Apex machines, which are very expensive. Some schools are therefore forced to take the difficult decision of rationing the Apex machines that are provided to them by the department. Usually they reserve the machines for matric learners, knowing full well that schooling does not begin in matric; that this is not where the foundations are laid.

Teacher training

Many teachers at schools for the blind are not proficient in Braille. Training of these teachers is not being planned properly, and the training is irregular and inadequate. This compounds Braille-access and -learning issues, and effectively means that schools are not best placed to develop learner literacy.

Sham assessments

The lack of interest in learner achievement is merely an extension of the lack of interest in their schooling needs, and we have documented serious examples of neglect in relation to exams:

* Often, poorly translated Braille exam scripts are provided, and learners must take time deciphering the material.
* Some schools have reported learners not receiving Braille scripts for their exams at all. To overcome this, and avoid turning learners away, teachers dictate standard printed questions to learners. This has meant reading aloud, for example, a mathematics question paper.
* At the stage of actual assessments, learners appear to be allocated aggregated marks, which are usually between 30% and 40%. No one admits that this is being done, but the teachers who know individual learners’ abilities, are able to see this.

Underlying problem

The underlying problem is clear: The department appears not to take blind learners seriously at both the level of planning and of implementation.

In respect of planning, for example, the very roll out of the image-centric CAPS curriculum is problematic. It was never adapted for visually impaired learners. No regard was had to the fact that even state-commissioned reports showed that constant curriculum changes deeply affected visually impaired learners.

On the level of implementation, there has also been little work. For example, a conditional grant which was recommended in order to capacitate schools for learners with disabilities (i.e. to fund them according to their needs and not an objective formula) has never been made. Schools have therefore been unable to fund their particular infrastructure or staffing needs.

Finally, the bureaucracy at work is another manifestation State apathy. For example, the department does not create posts for orientation and mobility practitioners on the basis that they are not recognised by the Health Professions Council of South Africa. However, the process of recognition and registration is lengthy and there is no interim measure in place to ensure that visually impaired learners have access to orientation and mobility skills. There are therefore a host of skilled practitioners whose skills are not being channeled.

Conclusion

Visually-impaired learners are likely to face one of two problems in their lives in accessing education: One, accessing a school, and two, assuming they get access to a school, accessing quality education.

In our view, these problems are rooted in politics to which the social model of disability speaks. In other words, the situation of visually impaired learners in the education system must be addressed through corrective action in respect of people’s attitudes and the practices of the State.

Having identified the hurdles and the possible sources, we should not feel completely disheartened. This in itself is an important step which can provide a strong foundation for further action.

In order to take meaningful action going forward, we need to erect a principled framework around the problems faced by visually impaired learners in accessing education. This would first involve establishing what we want to achieve. Is it something as broad as equal education for visually impaired learners? Alternatively, is it quality care, continuous support and the means to achieve financial security and a decent standard of living for visually impaired people?

Once the key objectives have been determined, we can begin to develop exact tactics toward achieving them.

We can, through our experience at SECTION27, say that the strategy would have to entail three things: First, it would need to involve building a broad-based movement involving productive inter-class exchanges within the blind community. Second, it would need to involve tapping into the power of media as a lobbying tool. Third, it most likely will need to involve carefully considered litigation, informed by in-depth research, to force the development of policy and to compel action when all else fails.

1. \* Attorney at SECTION27. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)