Including a learner with a visual impairment:

A mainstream school perspective

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Having a learner with severe visual impairments in a mainstream school requires an enormous amount of dedication and commitment on the part of the teachers, the facilitator and the parents. Our learner has had the best case scenario and has excelled academically. She is one of the top students in her grade and will leave our school at the end of next year, when she completes Grade 7, with an excellent academic background. This is thanks to her dedicated facilitator, parents, teachers and her superior level of intelligence. While she has excelled academically, she has struggled significantly on a social and emotional level. Being the only blind child in a large, mainstream school has taken a toll on her.

**Our learner’s academic success has been a combination of the following which I believe are vital when considering mainstreaming a learner with a visual impairment.**

1. Dedicated parents with financial resources

The parents’ role has been to:

* Employ a highly skilled, experienced, specialist teacher as her facilitator.
* Source and purchase specialised equipment and Braille material at great expense. Our learner currently has approximately R300 000 worth of equipment at school. This is all equipment which is essential.
* Dedicate their time to overseeing the facilitator and spending many hours converting material into Braille.
* Research the latest equipment and developments as well as sourcing technical support in learning to operate equipment acquired.
1. Facilitator is a highly skilled teacher who has experience in mainstream as well as extensive experience working with blind children

The requirements for the facilitator are to:

* Be qualified as a mainstream primary school teacher as well as specialised in teaching blind children and to be proficient in Braille. Besides being a mainstream teacher, our learner’s facilitator has a diploma in basic counselling and a two year diploma in special needs education. The special needs diploma included training in Braille. (There is no such course or training available in South Africa.)
* Teach the learner Braille up to the most advanced level.
* Teach the learner to use a cane and navigate her way around the school.
* Convert material needed in the classroom into Braille.
* Convert the learner’s work from Braille to sighted print for the teacher to mark.
* Plan every lesson of every day for the learner.
* Be extremely dedicated and prepared to put in many hours of hard work.
* Deal appropriately with the learner’s frustration and emotional outbursts.
1. Dedicated teachers

The teachers’ role has been to:

* Have all preparation including worksheets, tests and exams ready weeks in advance in order to allow the facilitator sufficient time to source diagrams in Braille and convert material into Braille.
* Stick rigidly to the planned lessons so the learner has the material for the lesson. There can be no spontaneity or flexibility on the teachers’ part.
* Adapt lessons which rely heavily on the visual modality.
1. Well resourced, well-functioning school
* Rivonia Primary is one of the top public schools in Gauteng. The school is well resourced and the Governing Body provide a budget to cover some of the cost of purchasing text books which are locally available in Braille.
* The school has excellent teachers who are dedicated and hard working.
* The school has an exceptional learner support department with suitably qualified professionals who are available to support learners and teachers.

**The challenges which have been faced are:**

1. The visually impaired learner – scholastic challenges
* Our learner is academically gifted and grasps concepts with ease. Due to the limited Braille material available and the amount of time needed to provide her with the essential material, she has not been extended as much as she should have been. At times she has complained of being bored.
* Group work and class activities – she has struggled with group projects and activities where there is not a suitable tactile option available for her. She is unable to participate to the extent that the other children do.
* She cannot always fully participate in visual art and physical education activities with the other children.
1. The visually impaired learner – social and emotional challenges
* The biggest toll on our learner has been socially and emotionally.
* She is the only visually impaired child in the school and has nobody around her who faces the challenges she has. This has resulted in her feeling disadvantaged and being constantly reminded that she is different from all the other children. She has needed play therapy several times over the years to deal with her social and emotional issues.
* She refuses to use her cane as she does not want to stand out as being different to the other children. She used to participate in athletics but has become more self-conscious about someone having to run with her and has been reluctant to participate.
* From a social point of view, when she was in the Foundation Phase, the children were far more accommodating of her. She has struggled socially in the Intermediate Phase and the teachers have tried to ensure that a child is allocated to her each day, so that she is not alone at break time. She had one close friend who unfortunately emigrated last year.
1. Teachers
* Increased work load and lack of flexibility.
* Have to be extremely organised and prepared well in advance.
* Dealing with the social difficulties, trying to integrate her and ensure that she is not alone at breaks.
1. Classroom Organisation and the other children
* There needs to be room in the classroom for the facilitator, Braille material and equipment.
* There is constant communication between the facilitator and the learner, as well as the sound of the Braille equipment, so the classroom is never silent while the other learners are working. Tests and exams are written in a separate venue for this reason.
* Group work is challenging and she complains that the children leave her out.
1. Lack of available material and lack of support at District level
* There has been no support from the District. Months before ANA exams were written reminders were sent regarding the Braille copy. A few times the Braille copies were not sent or arrived late.
* We have received support from specific people at the Gauteng Department of Education, particularly Mr Ignatius Du Preez who has been very supportive and tried his best to assist at all times. However, there has been a lack of cooperation within the GDE in terms of funding for Braille material. Master copies of Braille material cost thousands of rand. The cost of the master copies has to be paid by the Provincial Department before individual copies are available for purchase. Our learner has often been without books because the Gauteng Education Department has not paid for the master copy. Her Grade 4 Maths workbooks arrived after she had written her final Maths exam at the end of Grade 4. Grade 5 Language Workbooks arrived on 16 January this year, when she had started Grade 6.

It has been a privilege for us to watch our visually impaired learner develop and excel academically. We are very proud of her achievements and know that she will go on to achieve at high school and university. Our concern remains her social and emotional well-being.

The challenges we have faced have been in spite of having the best possible mainstream environment, facilitator, parents and teachers available. The majority of visually impaired children would not have the financial resources, the exceptional facilitator, highly skilled teachers and parents who are able to dedicate the amount of time and money needed. I cannot foresee that a visually impaired child would be successfully mainstreamed without all of the above being in place. I shudder to think of what would become of a visually impaired child who is placed in an under-performing school with large classes and no financial resources. Visually impaired children require teachers and facilitators who are more skilled than those that would be available in most mainstream schools.