**COMPARING SPECIAL NEEDS AND MAINSTREAM**

**EDUCATION FROM A BLIND CHILD’S PERSPECTIVE**

**- COLETTE ROOS**

When I was a young girl, all I wanted from life was normality. I wanted to be able to do sports, wear the latest fashionable outfits and read print.

It took me a while to come to terms with my disability, but eventually I did.

I was enrolled in Prinshof School at the age of 5, where I successfully completed my first 5 grades. When, in grade 5, I got the opportunity to enrol in a mainstream school, I jumped at the chance. Maybe now I’d be seen as normal.

My friends often told me that I’d be unhappy and that nothing would be the same, but I was determined to make things work.

When I first learnt to navigate Glenstantia Primary School, the going was a lot more difficult than I expected. Within the first 5 minutes, I’d already fallen and hurt my knee badly, but I persevered.

When I finally started grade 6, I thought my world was going to break into a million pieces. I found the work incredibly difficult, something I’d never experienced at Prinshof. After the first term, I wasn’t top of my grade. I had marks in the 60s and 70s, something that had never happened to me before. In short, I was unhappy with how things were going.

One problem that I never experienced in Prinshof was the lack of learning materials. Teachers always made a plan of some sort if they needed to distribute something in class. Because my mother needed to transcribe my notes from print to braille for me when I joined Glenstantia, I now needed the notes in advance. All the teachers knew this, and yet I sometimes sat in class with no notes because they had only been handed to me the day before. Was there ever a situation where I simply didn’t receive the notes at all? Yes, in a class where notes were often copied by learners directly from the overhead projector.

Mainstream relies heavily on visual aids to get concepts across during class. These may include, but are not limited to: Power point presentations, overhead projectors, black-boards, white-boards and diagrams. In Prinshof, teachers go to an incredible amount of trouble to make these visual aids accessible to learners. In subjects like life sciences and mathematics, teachers often have to spend hours just preparing a graph, sketch or diagram for us to work with.

The majority of my difficulties weren’t due to academics though. To me, it may have been important to be accepted, but as a preteen, popularity was higher on my priority list. In this regard, Prinshof was a lot more accommodating. I wasn’t pestered about my disability at every turn. People wouldn’t be told by a prefect to “stop staring”. I wouldn’t be locked out of class for being seconds later than the rest of the students.

I always tried to be the same as all the other students. I wanted to look good on the days when I didn’t have to wear my school uniform. We live in a day and age where looking good is almost as important as having an acceptable attitude. I had nobody to advise me on whether my shoes matched my outfit or if my hairstyle looked appropriate. I often found myself shying away from my age mates because of the giggling that went on behind my back. This made me doubt not only myself, but everybody around me as well. I began lashing out at the people who tried to help me, which made me very hard to live with on the best of days.

As much as I liked being challenged in mainstream, there was one important detail missing. A stable support system. I find that the teachers and auxiliary services in Prinshof are generally a lot better. Everybody understands what you’re going through, even if they don’t ask questions. You’re not as bothered by the needs of every day society in a community where everybody walks on even ground. I feel comfortable here. Glenstantia could never have been considered my second home, but Prinshof can.