**PRESENTATION ON STRENGTHENING ADVOCACY TO IMPROVE EDUCATION OF PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT**

TO THE EDUCATION SEMINAR

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Education of people with visual impairment is faced with serious challenges and that is the reason why stakeholders within the field have gathered here for these two days to try to come up with solutions. Challenges are increasing year after year because of the factors such as overemphasizing the concept of disability mainstreaming, putting emphasis on disability generalism as against paying attention on disability specific needs, localisation of services, poor resource allocation for disability programmes, inadequate social assistance and silo operations of different Government Departments.

**Disability mainstreaming**

The concept of disability mainstreaming is fairly new and many leaders, politicians and administrators, are still struggling to understand what it means. To some people, it means that one has to provide services to all without modifying anything with the believe that people with disabilities will automatically benefit like all other sectors. How to accommodate disability needs is an after thought. For instance, a policy on redeployment of educators was developed with no analysis on how it will affect education of people with disabilities. Currently, the effect of this policy is that skilled educators are taken away from special schools and unskilled educators are brought into special schools.

The policy on scholar transport benefits only day learners, while learners with visual disabilities who are mainly attending boarding schools far away from home and coming from poor families are struggling to attend schools. In terms of Social Assistance Act, not all children with disabilities are entitled to get care dependency grant. It is children requiring 24 hour care who are entitled to these benefits. Social assistance programme of Government is expected to assist poor parents in raising their children with disabilities. There are many children with visual disabilities who are rejected by the social security system.

Some parents use social security to keep their children with disabilities at home without enrolling them in available schools. They do this in fear that care dependency grant will be withdrawn, if it is known that the child is attending school. The policy on social assistance for children with disabilities promotes exclusion from schools.

**Disability generalism versus disability specific needs**

Prior to 1994, delivery of services for people with disabilities was measured per disability specific group’s needs. After 1994, it became popular to look at people with disabilities as one homogeneous group. Because prevalence of physical disability is high, people tend to think that addressing needs of people with physical disability implied that all disability categories are taken care of.

It is evident that reasonable accommodation relating to visual impairment encompasses a wide range of devices and services, as compared to reasonable accommodation for other disability categories. These devices and services include: braille, orientation and mobility, low vision services, audio devices, etc. Some institutions try to avoid providing all these range of services by choosing one type of service. People with visual impairment have the right to choose which services or devices are suitable to them, as individuals.

Localisation of services

Within the Constitution of the country, many services are localised as much as possible. There are few services which are declared national competency such as water and sanitation, police, justice (courts). Education is broken into two competencies, i.e. policy making is the national competency while implementation is the provincial competency. Budgets are allocated to provinces according to the size of provincial populations. The following provinces receive huge budgets Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Against the spirit of localisation, all provinces are expected to develop special schools, which they did not have before. Consequently, some of these developed schools are small schools. There is a school with about 30 learners with visual disability. It is a fact that small schools, even in the mainstream society, are not sustainable. Some of the grades in such a school are combined just to ensure that all learners get a bit of education. Funding of schools is worked according to the number of learners the school has.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education for people with visual impairment is possible, however, there are many provisions within the White Paper 6. On Inclusive Education which are not implemented. Special Schools are expected to be strengthened to be resource centres for inclusive education. Instead, special schools are gradually getting weaker and weaker.

Providing learner-teacher material in special schools seems to be a nightmare, while the numbers of such learners are well known to education authorities. Currently, support to learners with visual impairment in mainstream schools is completely not in place.

Numbers of totally blind children are decreasing and low vision is huge. The health system is unable to identify all children with disabilities, including children with visual impairment. This means there are many children with low vision in mainstream schools who are not identified and not receiving adequate support.

Provision of Educators

In South Africa, there is a belief that educators with visual impairment can only work in a school for the blind. Even in schools for the blind, sighted educators without braille skills are easily employable as compared to blind educators with braille skills. Currently, there is a number of blind educators unemployed or ultimately employed in other fields such as switchboard operation. Educators with visual impairment in some instances are working without teacher aids. Teacher assistant is also some form of reasonable accommodation which should be provided according to Policy on Reasonable Accommodation and Assistive Devices for Employees with Disabilities in the Public Service of 2015.

There are many educators working in special schools without special education in visual impairment. Some years back, it was the responsibility of the school to conduct in-house training. This approach is no longer suitable, because, schools have absorbed large number of educators from mainstream schools requiring support.

**Advocating for a Better Education of People with Visual Impairment**

Currently, South Africa has enough policies that can be used to advocate for disability equality. These include the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities approved by Cabinet in December 2015 and launched by President Jacob Zuma on the 10th of March 2016. South Africa also ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007. These policies, without the strong blindness advocacy machinery, which is education focused, are likely to be implemented at a snail’s pace.

In South Africa parents of children with visual impairment are not organised and as such have a weak voice in the education of their children. In South Africa, except schools for the blind, all organisations of/for the blind are generalists. As a country we do not have a civil society platform to bring stakeholders within the education of people with visual impairment under one roof to discuss and come up with the way forward. It is true that attempts are being made here and there to advocate for some aspects within the education of people with visual impairment, however, the impact is minimal.

In the absence of a national platform to discuss education of people with visual impairment, schools for the blind have joined Sa National Association of Special Education, which is another generalist in education of people with disabilities. It is clear that specific issues within education of people with visual impairment do not feature on the agenda of this body. Higher Education Disability South Africa is another attempt to close the gap in respect of higher education. Individual higher education institutions are from time to time organising seminars on education of people with disabilities, however, the impact is also minimal. Various efforts are not consolidated into one national strategy to make a difference in the education of people with visual impairment.

United, we are strong and divided we fall. By creating a national platform/organisation on education of people with visual impairment, we will be enabled to speak louder in advocating for a better education of people with visual impairment. It is important that the stakeholders on education of people with visual impairment meet year after year to discuss, assess and advocate for the betterment of education of the sector. This platform should be able to discuss various issues ranging from early childhood development, special schools, inclusive education, teacher-training, learner-teacher support material, adult education, etc. There are various options to follow, either to create a national sub-structure under Council for the Blind or create a completely new organisation. If we do not act now, there will be very little impact or not be any difference we can make in the education of people with visual impairment.