

PAKISTAN

Ms. Rabia Amir

Providing Effective Teaching Material and Methods for Children with Visual Impairment

Unlike the regular education system that has undergone transformation, the methodology of educating the visually impaired persons has been developing at a slow pace. The reason being lack of awareness about the abilities of blind community and financial constraints that impede rapid adaptation to modern approaches. Broadly speaking, the system of educating persons with visual and other disabilities may be classified as traditional and modern where modern is the one that calls for a greater integration of blind students in regular schools for their social mainstreaming later in life.

The methods available to teach and train visually impaired students have been developing ever since it was realized that blind people should be given formal and informal education. However the methods prevalent in Pakistan range from learning- by- rote techniques to computer with speak out facilities. The availability of these modes varies from person to person and region to region and is subject to social and financial constraints.

Whilst safeguarding principles of inclusion, flexibility is essential if visually impaired children are to make the best use of dedicated literacy time in schools. There is a need to develop new inclusive approaches that reflect the best strategies for teaching visually impaired children using large print, tape, braille and other communication systems. In Pakistan also, the special education teachers been trained to support their professional development and have access to case study materials reflecting a broad range of approaches to literacy for visually impaired children. They are prepared to follow a more flexible approach to the exchange of resources, expertise and joint training within a region to:

- * improve information about availability and suitability of learning materials
- * guarantee high quality braille teaching
- * enable staff to share experiences and expertise in teaching communication and literacy to children with impairment

With the arrival of Braille, the medium of instruction for person with visual impairment was formalized. Due to significant difference between regular education and Braille, it has been a common practice to separate children learning through Braille from the formal education system and hence special education centers were established. Braille slates and Perkins Brailers are the most commonly used instruments. The students are taught in Braille but when it comes to examinations, which is conducted by Federal Board of Examination, the ability of blind student is tested and assessed through provision of 'writer'.

The large text printing has also been quite popular to facilitate reading by low vision persons. Due to scarcity of resources and lack of educational material in remote and under developed areas, children are usually taught remunerative skills to enable them to make economic contribution as other family members do.

With the passage of time and with advancement in technology, in Pakistan also, the use of modern technology like computer with voice synthesizer and the like, is being utilized at initial basis at National Library and Resource Center.

The prevailing situation regarding the provision and use of teaching material shows that the services to visually impaired persons/students need improvement. At present, the educational resources currently being utilized include: assessment of vision, early intervention, special schools, vocational services, talking books, Braille, print, low vision aids, Braille production equipment, mobility training and aids, computer technology and low vision training.

The services available for visually impaired persons are not being fully used due to lack of awareness amongst client, lack of accessibility, parental and societal attitude, financial constraints and lack of sufficient trained teaching/training staff. The National Institute of Special education, Pakistan is however making all possible efforts for the provision of relevant and up to date training in teaching methodology and in the use/preparation of teaching material for visually impaired children, assessment of low vision, orientation & mobility, vocational training and so on.

There is a hindrance behind the proper development, distribution and use of instructional material in Pakistan due to the gap between manufacturers, suppliers and service providers. There is very little encouragement for the manufacturers of the devices/aids for visually impaired persons. Thirdly there is a need of proper resource centers at various levels for distribution of assistive devices. The number of Braille production units/presses is very small which is insufficient to cater the need of Braille books at country level.

With the financial and technical support from some International organizations like JICA, Sight Savers International, Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted, we have been able to provide teaching aids/equipment including low vision aids, Braille production units, vision assessment material, CCTVs, computers with speech synthesizers, mobility aids, vocational training for blind and low vision children and the like.

In special education centers, training was provided to teachers to prepare embossed geometry sets with locally available low cost material which is being successfully used for teaching geometry to blind children. Along with that, the same technique is being used to produce tactile diagrams and maps as well.

In spite of limited resources and services provided to the disabled including visually impaired persons, an awareness among the general public has been created in result of efforts made for the education and rehabilitation of disabled by the Government and non government organizations so far.