

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Volume One - Number Eight - October 2001

Discrimination in special education facilities

Speaking about discrimination former president Nelson Mandela said during his inaugural speech as president: "Never, never, never again." But children with disabilities or autism face discrimination daily, not only by society, but also within special education facilities, writes **Shelley Tooth** the principal of a school for children with special needs.

The options for children with physical disabilities to obtain an education are seriously limited in KwaZulu-Natal and many other parts of South Africa. In the greater Durban area recognised schools catering for physically disabled children have strict admissions criteria. There are no schools that cater for children below the age of three and few that admit low-functioning cerebral palsied children. Youngsters who have multiple handicaps have even fewer options, and autistic children in South Africa have even fewer. In KwaZulu-Natal, the only programme provided is offered in three classes at one particular school.

It is estimated that every year about 200 children are being turned away from recognised schools. This number is only an indication of the disabled or autistic children that we are aware of. Little is known about children in rural areas where parents do not have the means or facilities to even have their children diagnosed correctly.

Children who have disabilities face numerous challenges every day. A parent of an autistic child says that society believes her child is mad and should be put in an asylum. Members of the public often approach children with disabilities as if these children are totally lacking in brain function. They view disabled children as being mentally retarded and incapable of understanding a normal conversation. They do not realise that the children have a disability not an inability!

But it is not only society that discriminates against children with special needs. Although they should be offered the same rights as non-disabled children to pursue their learning potential to the fullest, disabled children are often discriminated against even within special education facilities.

Addressing the needs of a disabled child from a young age is particularly important. Early childhood development applies to the process by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially. It is important during this time that a sound foundation is laid for the child and family life and for future learning.

To enable a child's special needs to be addressed from a young age, early identification is of paramount importance. If children do not receive the necessary therapy, medical intervention and specialised support for their physical, intellectual and psychological development their progress is

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hampered and they do not receive the training or tools to integrate acceptably into society. Identification of special needs leads to early intervention that minimises frustration, ensures better personal adaptation and helps the child cope with the demands of educational programmes and society. This early identification is hampered by the absence of facilities for disabled children until the age of three.

All children affect, and are in turn affected by, their parents who also find themselves in a challenging position. The parents have to cope with children who are less active, provide less feedback, have trouble communicating - some even on a basic level - and need assistance in every facet of daily living. Some cerebral palsied children have great difficulty with potty training with the result that many will remain in nappies throughout their childhood. They are unable to bath, eat or play without adult assistance. They are difficult to transport and maneuver and, as a result, are seldom part of the activities of the family. Disabled and autistic children are seldom seen in public.

Parents may attempt to pursue a whirlwind of activities aimed at helping the child, but this leaves little time for fun and relaxation. Financial strain is often caused by the constant need for updated, adapted and specialised equipment. Usually both parents have full-time jobs and need reliable centres where they can confidently leave their child in the care of qualified people who are committed to meeting the needs of the child. Parents also often experience unhappiness, guilt and shame mainly due to ignorance. They often find it difficult to accept the special needs of their child.

The school that I established, Whizz Kidz Special Needs Unit, arose from my realisation of the great need within special education. We started small - with three pupils -- in April 2000 to accommodate children who were on a waiting list. In less than a year it was necessary for us to find bigger premises. At the end of 2000 we had 10 pupils and in January this year there were three new enrolments. Our numbers were up to 17 pupils by July. Nine more queries have been made regarding placement and already some children are on the waiting list for January 2002. We are growing at a rapid rate! And I still get phone calls every week from parents whose children literally have nowhere to go.

Whizz Kidz caters for low functioning cerebral palsied children, children with limited or no functional speech, autistic children and some children who are still undiagnosed. Many of the children have multiple handicaps and have been turned away from most of the established special needs facilities. Their options for education are incredibly limited due to the withdrawal of government funding to special needs facilities, particularly in the pre-primary phase. The financial limitations have resulted in strict admissions criteria and staff shortages.

There is no possibility of Whizz Kidz receiving assistance from the government in the near future. I have been told that I would have to wait three or four years because there is no money. Part of our running costs are covered by the payment of school fees by parents, but we continually rely on support from the community, service clubs and business. We have ongoing fundraising programmes and are continually looking for sponsorship.

Educational programmes for children with special needs must be designed according to the specific requirements of each child. This is particularly important because no two cases of cerebral palsy and autism - both extremely complex conditions - are exactly alike in nature or degree of disability. The nature and extent of the child's handicap must be taken into consideration to enable the child to develop to their full potential. Each child also progresses at a different pace depending on the type of intervention received. Small classes are more suitable to allow the teacher and therapists, who may include an occupational therapist, a speech and language therapist or a

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physiotherapist, to devise individual programmes for these children.

At Whizz Kidz a top priority is augmentative and alternative communication, which is a method of communicating that is used to compensate for a lack of speech. This also helps to facilitate the development of speech for children who may possess the ability to eventually speak. We devise various strategies using aids such as symbol systems, communication boards and high tech devices, and unaided systems such as gestures or signs. The technique enables children to express themselves, participate in activities and make choices and decisions of their own. It also enables the teacher to find out what the child knows, but had previously been unable to tell or show. This method enables all children to communicate, even though the strategies and scope may differ. Language, culture, race and disability do not hamper these methods of communication. Although augmentative and alternative communication programmes are a relatively new concept in South Africa, Whizz Kidz is well on its way to becoming one of the best resourced facilities in the country. This is thanks to corporate sponsorships and donations. Speech therapy students from a local university have already made use of our facility to observe the programme in action.

Whizz Kidz aims to assist the child not only in terms of education, but also to cope with the demands of society. In addition to communication and language development, programmes cover areas of independence training and self-care, social and emotional development, functional scholastic skills and the promotion of leisure and recreational skills. Many of these activities assist the child to become more socially acceptable and allow them to function more independently at home and school, as well as in the community.

The average school day presents many circumstances and activities in which every ounce of effort and control is needed for cerebral palsied and autistic children. For a child who struggles just to remain sitting upright for a short period of time, an hour can be exhausting and frustrating. When unrealistic demands are placed on these children in an academic environment, the development of their self-esteem is hampered. Such difficulties are not easily overcome.

Shelley Tooth is principal at Whizz Kidz Special Needs Unit, a not for profit, section 21 company, which she established in Pinetown in 2000.

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