

Outcome of mid-term review of the inclusive education programme for visually impaired children in Akuapim-North District of Ghana

David N. Botwey

Africa Rehabilitation Advisor
Sight Savers International
West Africa Regional Office
P.O. Box KIA 18190, Accra
Ghana

+233 21 774210 / 784702 / 768935
dnbotwey@sightsavers.org.gh

Ghana is located on West Africa's Gulf of Guinea, covering a land mass of 238,540 sq kilometres. It is bordered on the west by Cote d'Ivoire, east by Togo and north by Burkina Faso. With a population of approximately 20 million (2000 census), English is the official language. The rate of blindness is estimated at 1%, over 80% as a result of causes like Cataract, Glaucoma, Trachoma, Onchocerciasis, Childhood Blindness, and Refractive Errors & Low Vision.

In 1992, Ghana adopted the Global Education for All (EFA) policy as a constitutional provision (Act 38(2)). This policy seeks to provide **Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education** for every Ghanaian child of school-going age; it also places emphasis on the integration of disabled children as early as possible into basic education. There is however no specific policy on integrated or inclusive education. This presentation attempts to show how an integrated education programme is being nurtured towards an inclusive system of education.

The Ghana Society for the Blind in conjunction with the Special Education Division of the Ghana Education Service held a national conference on the development of education for visually impaired children in 1993. The conference established that an estimate of 12,000 visually impaired children does not have access to basic education and that the existing two schools for the blind in the country catered for a total of 300 visually impaired children.

An integration system of educating visual impairment children in mainstream basic schools was seen as a pragmatic alternative to the residential approach at the time, as education at senior secondary, post-secondary and tertiary institutions for visually impaired students follow the integrated system.

In response to addressing the need, the Special Education Division of the Ghana Education Service introduced Integrated Education as a pilot project at basic school level for visual impairment children in 1994 with technical and financial support from Sightsavers International. The project was located in the Akuapim-North District of the Eastern Region of Ghana.

The Integrated Education Project used itinerant teaching model. The concept was to enable visually impaired children have the same educational opportunities as their sighted peers in schools closest to them in their own communities and in the same classrooms.

Two specialist teachers of the blind were initially recruited and trained as itinerant teachers to work on the project. A third itinerant teacher was added three years later. The teachers operate from a resource room in the District Education office, with the most senior as Project Coordinator. The Coordinator handles the day-to-day management and reports to the District Director of Education. A national coordinator for the project is based in head office of the Special Education Division in Accra.

Since its inception, 90 blind and low vision children had benefited from the project. Seven (7) pupils have successfully passed through the programme and gained admission into Senior Secondary Schools. 233 mainstream teachers were trained in the management of blind and low vision children in classrooms. Fifteen (15) volunteer support teachers were recruited and trained to make up for the limited contact hour that the itinerant teachers had for the children. The project made provision for training parents of the children.

The project management commissioned the mid-term review as an internal strategy to assess achievement made in the second project cycle against the intended objectives and identify possible imperatives for a way forward. The outcome of the review would guide preparations for the end-of-project evaluation in 2008.

The four-member review team were representatives of the Country and Regional offices of Sightsavers International, the Special Education Division and District Education Office. The District Director of Education from a sister project led the team.

The terms of reference were:

- Project activities in current educational circuits and how expansion to the four remaining circuits had been achieved.
- Increase in identification of visually impaired children and improvement in their management in the schools.
- Increase in contact hours from an average of two hours per week per child to four hours a week per child.
- Increase in participation of key stakeholders in the district through sensitization activities.

The review team were required to determine the following:

- The extent to which the satisfactory implementation of project activities had led to the attainment of the desired objectives.
- If new objectives or activities were required to realize the aim of the project and if any one of the existing activities need to be deleted or approached differently.
- Make recommendations on ways in which investments made in the projects could be applied more efficiently and effectively.
- Make recommendations as to how the projects can begin consideration of issues including:
 - Partnership and advocacy
 - Project learning
 - Rights-based approaches and impact.

The methodology used included focus group discussions using the focus conversation method, interviews using unstructured questionnaire, direct observation and review of available records. The population size of forty-nine (49) respondents was randomly selected from the primary and secondary stakeholders of the project. Seven low vision and two blind pupils were seen.

- Clinical vision assessment records of children on the programme
- Functional vision assessment records of children on the programme.
- The 1999 Evaluation report
- The 1st, 3rd and 4th Quarterly Reports of 2004
- 1st Quarter report of 2005
- Children's examination papers
- Attendance registers of Itinerant Teachers in the IE schools

The main limitation to the exercise was the duration of five days that was allocated to the completion of the exercise, including field visits and report writing. This led to hastening visits and interviews and holding late evening meetings frequently to collate findings for reporting.

Findings and recommendations:

- One major objective of the project was to expand operations into last four education circuits. This objective had not been achieved, though isolated activities took place in some schools in the earmarked circuits. Reason assigned though was insufficient ophthalmic staff to carry out the preliminary eye screening upon which subsequent activities could be performed.

The problem of non-compliance to the expansion plan was identified; the project management had to review the plan against budget.

- A healthy working relationship exists between the staff of the Eye Department of Tetteh Quarshie Hospital - the main district hospital, and staff of the Integrated Education Project. School and community eye screening were periodically organised as the main sources for identifying children with visual problems. Cases of irreversible visual loss are referred to the project for follow up for medical and functional vision assessment.

Itinerant teachers are expected to conduct the educational assessment for each pupil prior to placement in the classroom. Each child has a file that contains the results of the various assessments and progress reports.

There was however a need for the various assessment procedures to be standardised and made conditional, which require that the itinerant teachers were given further training in conduct of functional vision and educational assessments. As a long term measure, an Assessment Centre was required to take account of all the sensory faculties of pupils.

- A number of non-optical learning materials notably; coloured learning materials, reading stands, felt pens, writing frames and Perkins Braille machines were in use. All seven low vision pupils used spectacles. Text books and writing exercise books were of the regular type, though most of the low vision pupils wrote boldly. The two blind pupils used Braille. No child had a magnifier.

The class work and examination results were assessed. Likewise, the team observed their interaction in class and in some instances gave simple tasks. The level of performance of the pupils, which was comparable to their sighted peers in class, was impressive. Besides the reading stands, nearly all the materials were foreign and thus inadequate.

The responsibility for monitoring and supervising the project fell largely on the Programme Coordinator whose office was based in Accra, 90 minutes drive from

the district. When asked why education inspectors in the District Education Office were not involved, the response was lack of technical know-how and funds for school visits.

The team found the responses discouraging as they were indicative of the non-inclusive nature of the project, which were threats to its sustainability.

On the basis of the responses, the review team recommended the pursuance of local production of learning and teaching materials. There was also an urgent need for a shift from the integrated approach, which was 'vertical' and non-inclusive in approach, to a more inclusive system that would involve the entire officials of the district education office.

- The itinerant teachers prepared itinerary, which incorporated their work schedules. Each recipient school maintained an attendant register in which itinerant teachers logged their 'in' and 'out' movements, with the average contact hour per child per week being one hour and an average travel time of 60 minutes per week on motor-bikes. Itinerant teachers withdraw the pupil from class to address remedial problems, and hold case meetings with the class teacher and volunteer support teacher, paying home visits to interact with the pupil's parents in special situations.

The voluntary support teachers are recruited in each recipient school and trained over a week. They had no work plan, but maintained a record of their work, which entailed direct responsibility for the wellbeing of the pupils both in school and at home, on part-time basis.

Considering all contacts made with various personnel, each child had an average of more than four contact hours per week. The team saw the importance of the volunteer support teacher system and recommended it to be formalised and re-named as 'Support teachers'. Their training ought to be standardised and a reward system introduced.

- The review noted that all teachers and head teachers in the recipient schools had been sensitized about the programme. Regular teachers however received extra exposure through the close interaction they have with itinerant teachers. The class teachers thus spent more time with the visually impaired pupils and sought the help of the itinerant teachers where necessary.

The team found the disposition of the class teachers encouraging, and recommend standardisation of their training to include teaching methods and techniques of producing teaching aids.

- Community awareness of the project was through informal sources. There were cases made for the introduction of Community Based Rehabilitation in the district to complement the Integrated Education Programme. There was a need for a plan for creating community awareness. The request for a CBR project was appropriate and worth considering.

General recommendations:

- With nearly 80% of the pupils on the project being low vision, there was need for the low vision service component to be stepped up and the adoption of a withdrawal strategy.
- The team were convinced that the intended objectives were being attained in the current circuits, and were satisfied with activities carried out as indicated above. Extension of the project to the four remaining circuits had however not been affected satisfactorily. The team saw a need for a clear strategy to achieve that objective.
- The District Integrated Education Committee had initiated a fund raising programme with the aim of introducing a Rehabilitation project to support graduates of the Integrated Education Project who could not further their education. Though well intended, this activity was totally out of phase with the aim of the project. The District Integrated Education Committee must advocate to the project partners and the District Assembly (Local Government Authority) for the introduction of a Community Based Rehabilitation project to complement the integrated education project.
- The terms of reference did not mandate the review to investigate financial investment made in the project. External auditors were better resourced to ascertain the effectiveness of the financial investment made.
- With regard to material investment, there was an urgent need for greater reliance on locally produced materials, which could start off from the resource room. Pupils' desks, classrooms and school environments could be improved to meet their special needs. A great deal of work on investment made on human resource development was already done, but ought to be standardised and continued.
- The partnership between the Special Education Division and Sight Savers International is appropriate but needed to be reflected in the core of the Ghana Education Service at the Ministerial level.

To foster an effective advocacy drive for expansion of the project or for a move for inclusive system of education in the country, the Ghana Association of the Blind or the Ghana Federation of Disabled Persons must be involved. There was also a need for an

Association of Parents of Visually Impaired or Disabled children to be fostered, at least from the support group level, to support the advocacy drive.

- The existing monitoring system of the project that only centre on the Coordinator, itinerant teachers, volunteer support teachers and class teachers, was found not conducive to foster effective project learning, as that system was ineffective to cause any structural change in the project. The project learning could however be more effective if control and management of the project was decentralised to the district level.

By this arrangement, the team was sure that project learning could be felt and managed throughout the entire education structure at the district and school levels and worked upwards to the regional level and subsequently to the national level.

- The review team saw a similarity between the 'rights based' approaches and an 'inclusive' approaches. The approach being currently applied was 'need based', which had had the desired positive academic impact. Notwithstanding its achievement, respondents saw the approach to be 'vertical' and non-inclusive.

The responses were indicative of a preference for a more horizontal approach, whereby all sectors the departments in the District Education Office could participate in the various implementation stages. By implication, all curricula and (extra-) or co-curricula sectors of the educational programmes in the recipient schools would be obliged to assume responsibilities for ensuring the inclusion of the visually impaired pupils in all activities.

This approach, it was observed would make the volunteer support teacher concept automatically defunct by spreading the responsibilities for the disabled child evenly among all teachers in the school. An inclusive system of education for the visually impaired children would thus be achieved at the school and district levels.

Conclusion

The review team acknowledged the importance of the integrated education system to meeting academic needs of the visually impaired children on the project and admitted the 'vertical' and non-inclusive nature of the approach. The respondents, especially those in the education sector had become conscious of the benefits of the project to the pupils' wellbeing and to the profile of the district education office, and desired to be a part of the 'gains'.

The team was delightful of the agitation for a shift from the integrated to a more inclusive approach from the school up to the district level. It was a true call for a bottom-up response, which could guarantee sustainability. The move might have occurred by

default. However the lesson learned was the possibility to work towards inclusive education from an integrated approach.