

The deaf blind and multiply challenged in Chile

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This book tells the story of the education of multiply challenged and deaf-blind people in Chile from the 1980s to today. The book is written from the personal experience of the author.

The book intends to guide special education teachers who work with multiply challenged boys and girls and describes the innovative approaches used in Chile over the last 25 years. Though specialized in giving technical advice, the book is also a guide for parents dealing with multiply challenged children.

The book also takes account of the contribution of national and international organizations that over the last generation have developed support networks to promote the development of these children who formerly were discriminated against and marginalized in Latin America.

The book defines a multiply challenged person as one who “exhibits two or more handicaps that make daily life difficult.” This definition was coined at the Second National Workshop of Professionals Working with Multiply Challenged People, which took place in Chile in June 2003 at UMCE.

The book tells readers how to work individually with multiply challenged students. It begins with an initial mapping that permits us to estimate the current and future needs of the student, the expectations that the family should have, the strategies of intervention that should be used, how to prepare a PEI and to apply a Functional Curriculum. The challenges students face can be physical, social, sensory, and intellectual, and affect overall development. A student’s abilities need to be discovered in order to make communication easier and to foster development of the areas mentioned above.

The first part of the text discusses the historical background of the education of multiply challenged children from the author’s perspective and experience during the 1980s in

Chile and describes the prejudices, fears, and doubts common then and understandable given the level of public awareness.

The book informs us about the legal framework established by the Chilean Ministry of Education in its Decree 89/90, which, on the one hand, specified the study program for visually impaired students and, on the other, the first time responded to these students' needs. The Decree permits the establishment of different curricula for multiply challenged students, which have been encouraged by the joint efforts of professionals and parents.

The book's second part refers to the national and international organizations that have contributed over the last 25 years to the education of visually impaired people. In this account particular attention is given to UMCE, CPEIP, FONADIS at the national level. International organizations like the Hilton Perkins Program, ICEVI, CBM, ONCE and ULAC are also given special mention. All these institutions have played a vital role in the transformation of Special Education in Chile between 1980 and 2005.

The book's third section focuses on information compiled in the Referential Framework on Deaf-Blindness and Multiply Challenges. It includes articles of great importance written by authors including Jan Van Dijk, Andre Lapierre, Bernard Aucouturier, Wolff Heller, K & Kennedy, Myklebust, Mary Guess, Maria Bove and some data from a CD of the Hilton Perkins program. Using what these authors say, the book describes the causes, characteristics, and curricular guidelines to deal methodologically with multiply challenged students.

Chapter four deals with communication, which is essential to achieving intervention with these students. It begins with an analysis of a child with a handicap and concludes with concomitants of the communicative challenges faced by children with associated impairments and the deaf-blind as a special case.

The theoretical framework is based mainly on studies done by Jan Van Dijk and Maria Bove. The book draws on Van Dijk's theories of movement and levels of communication, and on Bove's contributions to the area of evaluation in the process Oso-Proceso Estrella.

The book also explores issues related to the use of calendars of anticipation, because this instrument offers the student great possibilities of widening his communicative functions. The book also quotes teachers of the Texas School for the Blind, because this center has developed methodological strategies that can be applied to the calendars as well as criteria that enable calendars to be made. Finally, the text refers to the contributions in the area of methodology for young and adult deaf-blind made by Maurice Belote, Project Coordinator of California's Deaf-Blind Services.

Having analyzed what has been done in the area of education for multiply challenged persons in the last fourteen years, we can conclude that we should be optimistic. From total ignorance of strategies of educational intervention in the area and total lack of services, we have moved to a stage of sufficient knowledge to strengthen and improve the quality of existing services.

Changes in education are slow, particularly in special education, because the constituency needing help is small and its political clout is limited.

One of Chile's great strengths in this area is the fact special education teachers are university trained, as is reflected in the high quality of the scholarly papers they read in international conventions.

Professors at UMCE's special education department have been visionaries and anticipated developments in the area of multiple challenges by making curricular reforms for the prospective teachers for the blind in the 1990s. Contents related to the area of multiple challenges became part of the undergraduate curriculum at that time. This has widened the field in which our special education teachers can usefully serve. However, it's necessary, given Chile's geography, to strengthen teacher training through distance-learning and e-learning programs that would benefit teachers living in remote areas.

Chile's economic well-being allows it to invest in the area of special education. However, the governmental finance system and other subventions from the education ministry are insufficient and very few schools can really provide adequate services for multiple challenged students.