

An Innovative Project to Develop Services and Train Mentor Teachers for Programs Serving Preschool Children and Students with Visual Impairment with Multiple Disabilities in China

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Introduction:

The China National Institute for Educational Research, Chinese Ministry of Education, and Hilton/Perkins Program at Perkins School for the Blind have collaborated on a joint project since 2001 to begin educational services for two groups of children who were not yet receiving any education in China: preschool children who are blind, including those with additional disabilities, and school age children who are blind with additional disabilities. In 2000, there were no preschool or multihandicapped programs in China, and only three formally trained educators of students who are blind with multiple disabilities in the entire country. Now, in 2006, there are 10 preschool and 10

multihandicapped school programs spread throughout the country, with about 90 formally trained educators.

The objectives of the project during the first cycle (2001-20004) were:

- 1) To develop six model preschool and six model multihandicapped programs, and
- 2) To develop a model for training teachers.

The objectives of the project during the second/current cycle (2004-2007) include:

- 1) To develop a peer support network for teachers
- 2) To develop a support network for parents
- 3) To develop four additional programs at special schools for the blind for preschoolers, and four additional programs for students who are blind/visually impaired with additional disabilities

Two innovative aspects of this training model have been particularly successful:

1) With consultation from Hilton/Perkins consultants, participants developed “Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Preschool Children with Visual Impairment”, later extending them to include students with multiple disabilities. Having common agreement on what constitutes a quality program provided the foundation on which each program developed their own action plans and consultants provided feedback to programs.

2) Mentor/Consultant Training: During the fourth year, a smaller group of highly skilled teachers received specific training in how to plan and conduct trainings and how to consult to programs. These “mentor teachers” now provide on-going consultation and training within China for new teachers. In addition, a few key mentors were selected to participate in the Perkins Educational Leadership Program to enhance their capacity to be trainers and future leaders within China.

How did this collaboration result in such growth of services? From the beginning, we agreed that our goals were not only to develop model preschool and multihandicapped educational programs, but also to develop a team of skilled leaders within China who would eventually be able to train new teachers and provide support and consultation as programs were expanded to new schools.

A series of nine training courses, each conducted by two Hilton/Perkins consultants, were designed to systematically build skills. Immediately prior to each training, the consultants spent a week visiting school programs to provide focused consultation, assisting teachers in implementing, in the classroom, what they had learned in the formal trainings. The series of trainings culminated in a Mentor/Consultant training course in 2005.

Model preschool and multihandicapped programs began at the following schools in 2001:

- Beijing School for the Blind
- Chengdu School for Blind and Deaf Children
- Guangzhou School for the Blind
- Qingdao School for Blind Children
- Shanghai School for the Blind
- Zhejiang Provincial School for Blind Children

New programs have since begun at the following schools:

- Nanjing School for the Blind (Preschool and Multihandicapped)
- Chongqing School for the Blind (Preschool and Multihandicapped)
- Kunming School for Blind and Deaf Children (Preschool and Multihandicapped)
- Quanshou School for the Blind (Preschool)
- Wenzhou School for the Blind (Multihandicapped)

(See Appendix I for maps.)

The First Cycle (2001-2004):

When planning the courses, we knew there would be a great deal of new information for teachers, as they'd had no prior training in working with preschool or multihandicapped blind children. Rather than leave to chance what each teacher would remember from the trainings, we focused on what we felt were the most important principles to follow when teaching young children who were blind and children who were blind with multiple disabilities. The following "four big ideas", or the four most important principles for teachers and administrators to keep in mind as they developed and implemented the new programs, were incorporated throughout the trainings:

- It is very important for children to have opportunities to touch and use real objects, rather than models of man-made materials or miniatures, and to be involved in meaningful experiences/ whole activities.
- Children should be encouraged to be as independent as possible. In order to be independent, they need to be given time to participate as fully as possible.
- Children are part of a family and a community. It is very important to include each child's family as equal partners in their child's education, and for teachers and parents to communicate regularly.
- Children need consistency of people and events in their daily programs. They need to know what to expect in their daily schedules and they need to be able to depend upon consistent staff being available to them.

These “four big ideas” were integrated throughout the trainings. Teachers learned to implement these principles as they considered:

- How to set up the classroom environment
- How to interact with children and colleagues
- Staffing
- Scheduling
- Curriculum- both what to teach, and how to teach
- Assessment
- Involvement of families
- How teachers and administrators work together

Topics covered in the trainings included:

- Learning principles for preschoolers who are blind and children with multiple disabilities:
 - All children can learn
 - All children can communicate
- Literacy
- Concept development
- Orientation and mobility
- Activities of daily living
- Social/play skills
- Communication
- Behavior
- Low vision assessment, functional vision
- Assessment of children
- Development of individual learning goals
- Curriculum (developmental, functional, theme-based, vocational)
- Task analysis
- How to set up the classroom space
- How to set up a predictable daily schedule
- How to develop a staffing pattern that provides children with consistent staff and adequate staff for learning

The Second Cycle (2004-2007):

During the fourth year of the project, a small group of the most highly skilled preschool and multihandicapped teachers were selected to participate in further training as mentors/ consultants/ trainers. This intensive training focused on two major areas:

- How to plan, develop, and conduct effective training programs
- How to effectively consult to other programs

We felt it was important to agree on our goals and what we wanted our programs to look like, so we asked ourselves, “What does a quality preschool or multihandicapped

program for children who are blind look like in China?” As a result of our discussions, “Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Preschool Children with Visual Impairment/Blindness, Extended for Students with Multiple Disabilities” was developed during the third and fourth years. The “Quality Indicators” provide a standard against which programs can evaluate themselves and develop their own goals for continual improvement of their programs. They also provide a clear and consistent structure for the mentor teachers as they provide consultation to new programs. They help new programs understand from the beginning: What is our goal? What kind of program are we trying to develop? How will we know when we have been successful?

A few excerpts from the Quality Indicators follow:

(Excerpted from: “Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Preschool Children with Visual Impairment/Blindness”,

Developed for Consultation and Training with Preschool Programs in China

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Extended for Students with Multiple Disabilities by Charlotte Cushman, M.Ed.,

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Adapted from “Early Childhood Program Standards,” 2003, Massachusetts Department of Education)

Interactions Between Staff and Children, and Among Children

- Does staff communicate with children in a respectful manner? Does staff try to understand what children are communicating, through both language and behavior, and respond appropriately?
- Is each child encouraged to participate, even if he/she is not able to do so at the same level as the other children?

Curriculum

- Does each child have an individual educational plan, and teaching which specifically address his/her objectives at the appropriate level of difficulty?
- Does the curriculum reflect the priorities for the individual (e.g. language-based, life skills, academic, vocational)
- Do teachers use effective teaching strategies, teaching small steps and keeping children’s interest?

Scheduling and Grouping

- Does the child: teacher ratio meet the learning needs of each child?

- Are schedules and staff consistent?

Assessment

- Is there at least one assessment which is done at least annually for each child? Are the steps in the assessment small enough for the child? Do they measure meaningful skills in a developmental sequence?
- Does the teacher know what the child likes and dislikes and use that information to plan activities?
- Is assessment information used to plan and modify children's programs?

Physical Environment

- Is the space adapted, as necessary for children with visual impairments or blindness?
- Are there many and varied books and other materials related to literacy?

Family Involvement

- Does the school invite family involvement?
- Do parents and staff keep each other well informed about the child?
- Do families of different children have ways to communicate with each other?

Staff Qualifications and Staff Development

- Are there frequent opportunities for staff to develop their skills?
- Are there opportunities for staff to support each other and share information?

Teachers and Administration Working Together

- Do teachers and administrators communicate clearly with each other?
- Is there a clear way to implement change within the school?
- Do students have access to the same activities that the students in the rest of the school have?

Transition

- Are families given support as their children transition into new programs (e.g. preschool, primary school, new classroom, and, for students with multiple disabilities, into adult life)?
- Is there a systematic plan to acquaint new staff with specific children? Does it include information about the student's vision, communication, learning style, likes/dislikes?
- Is there a systematic way for children to become comfortable in the new program?

Program Evaluation

- Does the school periodically do a self-evaluation and set program goals on this basis?
- Does the administration support achievement of program goals?

Mentor Training:

Having observed that many skilled teachers were having difficulty expanding to the roles of trainer or consultant to other programs, we felt it was important to directly teach these specific skills to the teachers who would form the core leadership team within China as programs were expanded. During the consultation sessions, we showed these teachers various ways to get information (reading documents, interviewing/asking questions, and observing) and how to give information (informally modeling, presenting information orally, following up with written consultation notes). Mentor teachers learned how to structure oral and written notes according to the Quality Indicators, in each relevant area offering first general praise, followed by specific praise, and then specific recommendations.

Following the training, the Hilton/Perkins consultants made program visits with the new “mentor teachers”, supporting them as they gradually took the lead in program observations, interviews, and meetings with teachers and administrators. At the conclusion of the process, the mentor teachers expressed confidence in consulting to new programs on their own.

The leadership team and model programs that have developed within China can now provide support to new schools beginning preschool and multihandicapped programs. As we move forward, new schools will benefit from the following training process:

- Visit model preschool or multihandicapped programs, including classroom observations, meeting with classroom teachers, and discussions with a lead teacher who has received advanced training in the Perkins Educational Leadership Program
- Participate in a week-long intensive new teacher training program conducted by China mentor teachers
- On-site consultation provided to each program by mentor teachers

Additional Outcomes:

A number of additional outcomes are worth noting:

- The first “China National Congress on Education of Preschool Children who are Blind and Children who are Blind with Multiple Disabilities” was held in Nov. 2005. Teachers from the model preschool and multihandicapped programs made very informative presentations, clearly demonstrating their competence as leaders in the field in China. This generated significant interest among administrators of additional schools for the blind in beginning such programs. Eight-five participants from 37

organizations, including 29 Special Schools for the Blind, participated in the National Congress.

- Teachers have published five articles in the Chinese Journal of Special Education and the Modern Journal of Special Education, with five additional papers scheduled for publication this year.
- Numerous teaching resources and relevant educational materials have been translated into Mandarin.
- Several schools are expanding their services to provide support to families of infants and toddlers. As parents hear about the preschool programs, they are beginning to approach the schools seeking guidance on raising and educating their children. Some preschool teachers have begun to meet regularly with parents of infants and toddlers to share ideas and supportive guidance.
- Teachers have developed a strong peer support network. They have their own listserv on which they share challenges and suggestions.
- Parents are beginning to form their own support network. Each school holds parent meetings. Parents are beginning efforts to start a national parents' group. On individual levels, parents are connecting with each other, in person, and via the Internet.
- We are collaborating with Amity Foundation to train teachers and begin home-based early childhood care and education programs in Jiangsu Province, with teachers from schools for the blind in Nanjing, Nantong, and Lianyungang.
- We are exploring possibilities for including multiple disabilities in the teacher training program at a local college, and have begun to provide training to college faculty and students.

Changes in Attitude:

What changes have occurred as a result of this project? The biggest change has been in attitudes of parents, teachers, and school administrators. Initially, some people thought preschool education was important for children who are blind, but no one thought it was possible to do. Since preschool education is not compulsory, the government does not provide any support for staff, space, or equipment. Now many administrators are realizing that it is possible to provide quality preschool education to children who are blind. The change in attitudes toward children with multiple disabilities is even more pronounced. Before, people thought children who were blind with multiple disabilities could not learn because they could not follow the national curriculum. Most were excluded from school altogether. A few simply sat in the back of the class, but learned nothing. Now, both teachers and administrators in the model programs realize that children with multiple disabilities can indeed learn if they are provided with appropriate instruction, including a functional curriculum. Even at schools which do not yet serve children with multiple disabilities, there is a much greater awareness that this group of children exist. While there are still many schools that do not have the resources to begin multihandicapped or preschool programs, they realize that this is a

need. In the future, when they have the resources, they are more likely to begin such programs.

Parents have made connections with each other and are supporting each other. Whereas before they felt isolated, and as if no one else cared about their child, now they realize that other people also care about their child, and that there are other parents with whom they can share both the joys and challenges of raising a young child who is blind or a child who is blind with multiple disabilities.

Future Plans:

Challenges remain as we move forward, particularly as the project expands to rural schools:

- The biggest challenge is attitude, not as much of the teachers, as of society beyond the schools.
- It's more difficult to find the children, as many children are hidden by their families.
- Lack of adequate funding for staff, materials, and space is also a major obstacle.
- In addition, there continues to be a shortage of well-trained teachers.

We have a number of goals moving forward:

- To develop a National Parents' Association for parents of children with visual impairment, with parents taking the lead in further developing their support network
- To expand preschool and multihandicapped programs to an increasing number of schools for the blind in China, including rural schools
- To develop publications and training materials within China
- To build teams for assessment of students, both at a national level and at each school
- To develop more flexible educational placements
- To design child-centered curriculum
- To increase support from both local government and school staff
- To continue strengthening teachers' capacity
- To develop a National Resource Center for Children with Visual Impairment

Appendix I: Maps of School Programs in China for Preschool Children with Visual Impairment and School-Age Students with Visual Impairment with Multiple Disabilities: 2000, 2002, 2006



