

Equality of Access to Education

Mrs. Ursula N. Jeddy

Director

Aziz Jehan Begum Trust Institute for the Blind

11 Awaisia Housing Society,

Township,

Lahore

Pakistan

+92-42-5181211

ajbtinst@lhr.paknet.com.pk

Mohammad Salahuddin Jeddy

Chief Executive Officer

Aziz Jehan Begum Trust for the Blind

13-B, H-Block,

Gulberg-II,

Lahore

Pakistan

+92-42-5750336, 5750337

ajbtrust@lhr.paknet.com.pk

For centuries visually impaired have been perceived as the most helpless among the disabled and therefore the most to be pitied. The spectacle of visually impaired of all ages begging for alms on the streets and around religious shrines, and tombs of saints is a most common sight in developing countries¹. Neither the families nor the society, consider them fit for any formal education. The only education in vogue for them has been memorizing the Holy Quran or singing devotional songs. Formal education especially in Braille or with special aids has been unheard of. The universal importance of education cannot be ignored which becomes doubly imperative when we are dealing with children who had the misfortune of losing their sight at an early age. Early visual impairment has many negative and far reaching effects on the development, education, future opportunities and personality of an individual. Besides the normal problems of development the children have to deal with innumerable frustrations, poor self-image and non-acceptance by the family, school in particular and the society in general. Due to these multiple and complex problems, they need special attention both at home and skilled, well trained teachers in the school. The statistics regarding the education of visually impaired children are alarming. It is the most neglected segment of society and any education for them is considered wasted effort and money.

Figures Obtained From 1998 Census

Total Population of Province of Punjab = 73621,290
Visually Impaired = 154,962

Visually Impaired Children Between age 5-19	Schools Available	Enrolment	Level of education
40359	20	867	Primary

In 1996 Aziz Jehan Begum Trust for the Blind established the first English medium school to provide quality education to blind students up to high school level and bring them at par with their sighted peers. It was geared to fulfill the special educational needs of visually impaired students who are generally left out from the main stream of educational system and fail to find a meaningful goal in life.

The Trust had multidimensional initiative to improve and upgrade the standards of education for the blind. Aziz Jehan Begum Trust Institute for the Blind is a pioneer in the use of the state of art equipment of Assistive Technology for the blind in this country and has revolutionized their education. This Institute is providing a 'New Innovative Service Model' with its motto "Knowledge Equality, Opportunity". In a country like Pakistan, where education even for sighted is at a low margin³ it is difficult to concede to the idea that given equal opportunities and proper education, the blind children can become independent and self supporting. Without education, the visually impaired children grow into adulthood with no guidance and live as life long appendages often unwanted by the family. This situation is more relevant to the girl child. Without education or training visually impaired are left to the charity of others because even as unskilled labours they have to compete with their sighted peers who have a definite edge over them.

Loss of vision is extremely detrimental in the process of education because 80% of our learning is through sight. It is due to this factor that visually impaired students are ignored and are left out from the main stream of education. Blind students have to rely totally on their other four senses especially tactile. Braille is the universally recognized language for the blind. Reading and writing of Braille is taught from class 1 to the students of this Institute. It is with the efforts of this Trust that Braille has been introduced and recognized in the school examinations of the Board up to higher secondary level and also by the Universities of the Punjab as a mode of examination for blind students. They can opt to receive the question papers in Braille and write their answer themselves which is opposed to the prevalent system where a sighted writer assisted in reading and writing the examination paper.

Since its inception, all students of this Institute opt for General Science subjects for their high school Board Examination which includes Mathematics. They study geometry and take the same examination as the sighted students; the only difference is that their papers and answer sheets are in Braille. In today's world computer plays a pivotal role in modern education. Many main stream schools have introduced computer education in their curriculum and no education can be completed without its use. It was foreseen ten years ago by the Founder of this Trust and from the very start Computer Science was made a compulsory subject from class four onwards. All students of this Institute must learn computer and it is taught as a compulsory subject.

The computerized Braille Transcription Centre of the Trust transcribed all regular text books into Braille and each student is provided with her/his own set of text books, free of cost. Many books include embossed graphics and diagrams to explain the text. Braille transcription facility is also provided to all our ex-students, who are at various levels of college education. So far about 100,000 Braille pages and other material have been transcribed. Students have an easy access to Braille maps, models and stuffed animals. AJB Trust also has its own recording studio, which is available for recording any material for students. Many books, stories, and songs have been recorded in its sound proof studio coupled with a facility of an audio laboratory in the Institute which makes it easier for students to listen to talking books.

No educational centre can be complete without a good library, because, library facilitates learning. The Institute's Braille library has over 5000 books which include world classics, children's books, books on poetry, art and drama both in English and Urdu. A large number of reference books, encyclopedias, 800 talking books and 1600 books donated by a School for the Blind in Australia are included. The library also has 1300 large print books. The library is furnished with a reading machine, a CCTV and variety of magnifying glasses of various strengths. Dictionary is an important basic reference book. The one and only English/Urdu Braille Dictionary was produced by the Founder of the Trust, the late Miss. Salma Kishwar Jan.

Many visually impaired students have multiple psychological problems most of which are ignored due to family attitude. A sense of shame that their child cannot see coupled with a feeling of guilt that this is a punishment for some sin or excess which they have committed is extremely damaging to the child's self-image. To understand their psychological problems and help them overcome their added disadvantages is again the responsibility of educational Institutes. It may appear difficult but it is not impossible and with time and effort they develop the mental maturity and understanding to accept their visual loss and learn to live with it. Independent mobility is an important part of personality development for the visually impaired. To accept ones shortcomings and a belief in oneself gives a confidence which also commands respect from others. It is the

endeavor of this Institute to help students in developing faith in their own abilities and change their incurable disability into a confident personality. All students learn the techniques of independent mobility and use of White Cane. They learn to walk straight, head high, independently and with pride.

Students of the Institute are trained in daily living skills; they have cooking, sewing, sports and swimming classes. With the help of their teachers they learn to make models and work on various projects, perform Science experiments and go on recreational cum educational trips. They visit factories, workshops, museums, parks and public utility facilities. All these trips are pre-arranged and everything is explained to them in great detail. All students are exposed to the use of electrical and mechanical tools.

Students of the Institute are encouraged to take part in as many activities as possible to compete with their sighted peers. Through these activities students learn to share, develop team spirit and also have a competitive approach. The Institute is proud to have a pipe band which again is unique for any organization for special students.

Education of the blind is a very expensive affair, especially in our country where all material and equipment has to be imported. Making Braille books itself is very costly. Transportation of the students to and from the educational centre requires resources which are beyond the reach of most of the parents. Parents also feel that already scarce finances are better spent on their sighted children who are going to be a sure asset and eventually earning members of the family rather than on a child whose future is doubtful. In the absence of appropriate legislation quite often even those in affluent circumstances are reluctant to make any physical effort or financial outlay to bear the cost or part of the cost of tuition, training and transport of their blind offspring in the mistaken belief that time and money thus spent will be a total loss with no returns. Amna lost her vision due to Retinitis Pigmentosa at the age of 13 years. Her mother a medical practitioner and father a manager in an agriculture bank did not believe that she could receive beneficial education. With many doubts in mind they brought her to the Institute because she wanted to go to school like her sisters. She was allowed to take part in the Institute activities grudgingly, however maximum encouragement was offered in the Institute. It was only in 2005 when she passed her high school examination in Ist Division taking all her papers in Braille that parents accepted that her education was worthwhile; presently she is studying Computer Science, Mathematics and statistics in a college and wishes to do MCS. For families with meager means of income the choice is to educate the sighted children rather than spending on the one who is not going to be an economic asset. Little do they realize that it is only education which can help their child overcome the hurdles imposed by the loss of sight?

The world regards, Dr. Helen Keller a miracle person because of her achievements despite her loss of vision and hearing; but how can we forget the architect of this miracle

person, her “TEACHER”. The devotion, and missionary spirit combined with good education and training have to be behind

any great achievement. It has been our good fortune to find teachers who have Master’s degrees and are willing to gain proficiency in English, Urdu and Mathematics Braille and learn orientation and mobility. We are proud of the love and dedication which our faculty has for these students.

Loss of vision does not mean loss of abilities. With equal opportunities and knowledge, blind students can compete and even excel. An example of this is one of our own ex-students. Saima joined one of the prestigious colleges of Lahore and after four years of study, she was awarded the ‘Gold Medal for Academic Excellence’. Blind students are no less than their sighted peers; the only difference is that they have to adapt alternate ways and equipment which is difficult and arduous. Aziz Jehan Begum Trust for the Blind is a unique Institute in the country with its state of art equipment and best training facilities both for students and teachers. It is a model to be followed in a country where the education of the blind is still at a rudimentary level even in the 21st century. The students here are using all those assistive techniques which have not been available to their peers for a long time. The effort is to prepare them to enter any profession and employment field without fear and in open competition. Quoting one of our ex-students,

“Eyesight is one of the greatest blessings of God, but those of us who are deprived of it, education is sight, light and life. Before joining AJBT my life was dark and purposeless without any light and hope. But after entering this realm of light, the first lesson that was instilled in my mind was” look at your ability not at your disability” and this institute started polishing my God gifted abilities. For the first time in my life, I learnt orientation and mobility; the art of living life independently; Mathematics and Computer Science. I appeared for the Matriculation Examination which was held in Braille for the first time. Indeed, AJBT Institute has proved to be a real blessing of God for visually impaired students like me. It has given us confidence, courage, strength and above all a desire to explore our own potential and self esteem so that, we can achieve high goals in life.^{4.}”

Non-availability of educational equipment keeps the blind away from education. To educate, train and habilitate them, state cooperation is essential. More Special Education Centers and, resource centers are required. The very popular concepts borrowed from the west of inclusive or integrated education are not practical in developing countries. Integration only yields a facade of formal equality that veils grievous injustices⁵. The teaching methodology, special equipment and technical expertise is neither available nor possible in general education schools. In a country where one teacher is available for two to three classes the students share textbooks and the class rooms do not have the luxury, of desks and chairs, will not welcome a blind child. Public education is largely only a policy aspiration inaccessible to the large

majority of population and is insufficiently and admittedly poorly administered when it is available at all ⁶. The cost of special education is high or it would not be called special, and the cost for education of the blind is still higher.

The Government of Punjab's initiative to promote Special Education is very encouraging. It has opened 91 new centers of Special Education in its various Districts. Since this scheme is in initial stages and much has to be done to get these centres to start work in earnest and be productive. It is hoped that this will help in creating an awareness in general public and overcome the existing concepts.

-
1. Ursula N. Jeddy, Salma K. Jan and Mohammad Salahuddin, Educating the Visually handicapped in Pakistan. 'Vision Rehabilitation' Vision 99 Conference New York. Page 464.
 2. Population census in Pakistan 1998
 3. Literacy rate in the country is 40%; Economic survey 1997-98. Planning & Development Division.
 4. Saima Saleem: Speech in 2004 on White Cane Day at the Institute.
 5. Salma K. Jan and Ursula N. Jeddy. Educating the visually Impaired Segregation Vs Integration or Inclusion. Vision Rehabilitation Vision 99 Page 485
 6. Ibid page 487.
 7. Directorate of Special Education Punjab, Lahore 2005.