

In-service training for teachers and other service providers of visually impaired students with multiple disabilities

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Introduction

This paper discusses in-service training for teachers of children with multiple disabilities and for other related service providers. Much of the study reflects interviewee ideas gleaned while the author completed an M.Ed. for the visually impaired student at Boston College, USA. It also uses information obtained during the 11-20 March 2003 Deafblind workshop at Pioneer Institute for the blind in Worcester (Western Cape Province). These individuals are well versed concerning in-service training, and the author, in his capacity as co-ordinator of education services at the South African National Council for the Blind, has maintained close contact with three of them. They regularly spend time in South Africa training educators of learners with multiple disabilities from 4 schools with Deafblind units. Through this Paper, the author will highlight expectations and challenges of both trainers and trainees.

The paper is intended to address the following questions:

1. What is in-service training?
2. Who is the visually impaired person with multiple disabilities?
3. Which specific services should be rendered to such a person?
4. Most teachers and other service providers (O and M, OT, etc.) have relevant qualifications and experience to help people with multiple disabilities. Should they still undergo in-service training?
5. What are the short-term and long-term objectives of in-service training?

6. Are teachers and other service providers expected to have extraordinary talents in order for them to render service of high quality to these persons?
7. What are general expectations of trainees from these courses?
8. What are two or three of the major challenges in conducting in-service training?
9. How can trainers measure successes and failures on both a short-term and a long-term basis?
10. Is there any need for in-service training follow-up?

What is in-service training?

For the purposes of this paper it is defined as a workshop for employed professionals, paraprofessionals and other practitioners to acquire new knowledge, better methods, etc. for improving their skills toward more effective, efficient and competent rendering of service in various fields and to diverse groups of people. Further, such a workshop is a training designed to benefit a specific group of children at a particular school. A good in-service training should, via workshop trainees, improve the quality of programming for their multiply disabled students.

Who is the visually impaired person with multiple disabilities?

These have been identified as “Children and youth having auditory and visual impairments, the combination of which creates such severe communication and other developmental and learning needs that they cannot be appropriately educated in special education programs solely for children and youth with hearing impairments, visual impairments or severe disabilities, without supplementary assistance to address their educational needs to these dual, concurrent disabilities”. (Luiselli, T.E. et al., p250, JVIB, V89, no. 3, 1995). According to Tom Miller, “That can be a full range of people including any child with a visual impairment combined with a physical impairment, a visually impaired person with cerebral palsy, a visually impaired person with a learning disability, or a child with severe impairments including brain damage”. Other children may also have a very severe communication problem. According to Barbara McLetchie, who has done extensive research in this field, about 80 percent of students worldwide who have a visual impairment, also have one or more additional disabilities.

McLetchie asserted: “When you have visual impairments, especially from birth, that has definite effects on all areas of human development. And then, if you add additional disabilities, for example deafness, there are very complex and unique effects on the learners”. She further stated that the multiply disabled student is first and foremost a person, a person with abilities as well as disabilities, a person who can learn, and a person who can contribute to society. It is well proven by research and experience that people with visual impairments and multiple disabilities can assume a variety of roles. It is a very heterogeneous population. Some can become college professors, others can become workers in a sheltered workshop, but they all can contribute in some way to the

larger society. They must be given opportunities to be equal and the society must still recognise the existence of differences so that this population can always have unique services and appropriate assistance.

An important question is what makes visually impaired persons with multiple disabilities different? It is that sometimes they have to be taught in specialised ways to address their unique needs. "Lack of vision certainly impacts people's ability to learn from their environment. Hence, things have to be carefully taught", argues McLetchie. Most things that people with normal vision and normal hearing learn were never taught to them. Their distance senses automatically work and that is how they learn much about the world. They learn incidentally by always seeing or always hearing other people or observing life's events. Therefore, education should expose this vast knowledge to individuals who have visual impairments and multiple disabilities.

Which specific services should be rendered to such a person?

According to Alyssa Kimmel, this population needs services from people and places that are accustomed to dealing with their uniqueness. Such services may include an education that is functional and age appropriate, therapy services, counseling services, assessment services, low incidence specialists, etc. Aubrey Webson adds that the specific services to be rendered to this population include "education in its strict and broadest sense. The opportunity to develop intellectually, with training and support systems to facilitate that training". What should be taken into account here is that the types and degree of disabilities will determine the services rendered to an individual. At a minimum, as Tom Miller put it, "The students should also get a teacher for special education in visual impairment or a teacher who has specialised in deafblindness. It must be someone who can help other people who are involved with these students to understand the disabilities of the students. Someone who can adapt the environment so that it can be appropriate for learning."

Most teachers and other service providers (O and M, OT, etc.) have relevant qualifications and experience to help people with multiple disabilities. Should they still undergo in-service training?

The answer is a resounding yes, according to Tom Miller: "... especially OT's and PT's. Their training does not involve any instruction of how to work with people with visual impairments or deafblindness. They will be learning about how to modify the environment so as to make it less restrictive to the persons with visual impairments and multiple disabilities". The other major reason why teachers and other service providers should undergo in-service training is because for all learners who are deafblind, according to Barbara McLetchie's survey, only 6 percent of their teachers in the US have specialised training. The situation is shoddier in South Africa. No training is offered at tertiary institutions. That is why the SANCB a non-governmental organization is trying to solve this problem by inviting experienced trainers from the USA. This

indicates that there is a critical shortage of teachers in low incidence disabilities. In-service training can help close this gap.

Teaching students is an adventure. It does not mean in anyway that because teachers have a qualification or experience obtained over the years they know everything about either their subject matter or techniques to be able to teach well. Teachers are always in a process of needing to know more. "A qualification or experience is not a critical issue. As a teacher you need to be an ongoing learner" (McLetchie.). In-service training supports, motivates, educates and refreshes one's memory. To others it is a source of information on recent research and technology. It promotes cooperation between various people in the same field. It is a proper place for exchanging ideas and helping to solve each other's problems.

What are the short-term and long-term objectives of in-service training?

Short-term objectives of trainees' instruction should be:

- to recognize what they do not know and need to learn in order to better service students with multiple disabilities.
- To ask and get answers about what they did not understand, so that they may improve the way they teach.
- To think about how the environment can be adapted in order to make classrooms better places for learning.
- To learn practical ideas that one can bring to the classroom or to the families of one's students.
- To come away with skills, tools and information, which will help one to fulfill the immediate needs.

The following are some long-term objectives for in-service training:

To build more competence and confidence in working with visually impaired students with multiple disabilities.

To show the teachers how to enable their students to become more active in their own educational process.

- To have a bigger picture of the field as a whole, which would help in making proper decisions in the classroom.

In-service training should provide a good number of people with knowledge, skills and expertise. "What is important for both short-term and long-term objectives is that they should be sensitive to the culture, needs and places where they are to be implemented. Furthermore, they should be sensitive to the needs of the student and the needs of the teacher" (McLetchie).

Are teachers and other service providers expected to have extraordinary talents in order for them to render service of high quality to these persons?

Teachers and other service providers do not have to have extraordinary talents. Nonetheless, it may be to the benefit of the students if they have certain qualities including and not limited to: dedication, competency, patience, perseverance, etc. Aubrey Webson also argued that the teachers of visually impaired students with multiple disabilities don't have to be extraordinary, but they do have to be good, like any other teachers. And, if it is possible, they should be able to go an extra mile when doing their work, because teaching this population of students requires hard work. Alyssa Kimmel also holds that teachers need not necessarily have extraordinary talents, only to enjoy what they are doing, which goes a long way towards enabling them to do the job well.

What are general expectations of trainees from in-service courses?

Most trainees expect to learn more from these courses. According to Tom Miller, for example, "If you are teaching them about communication skills, they also expect you to talk about social skills, cognitive learning, etc". Others expect to do things differently with students as a result of training. They expect trainers to be agents of change meaning that at times trainers have to advocate for people with disabilities. Alyssa Kimmel observed that some of the people expected a workshop or in-service training to provide them with something that they would use right away, including materials, tools and skills.

What are two or three of the major challenges in conducting in-service training?

A good in-service training should be tailored to meet the needs of those taking the workshop. Therefore, the trainers should know the teaching conditions of multiply disabled teachers. Do they have the support of their administrators? Do they have access to the proper materials and equipment? What kinds of support services exist? What do they already know? Ideally, the trainers should first visit the school to see first-hand what the environment and facilities are like, what the teaching conditions are.

Tom Miller argued that the first challenge is to know, learn and understand the culture and expectations of people with whom one will be involved because "This is to make the learning opportunities make sense for them". Another challenge he considers is how he should create opportunities for the people to own the knowledge he will be giving them. Assessment of teaching process effectiveness poses additional challenges to be integrated too.

In every in-service training it is a challenge for the trainers to establish a good relationship with the trainees. Inevitably, some teachers will be coming because they want to learn new ideas or techniques, but others may be there because of coercion. It is important for the trainers to respect the participants, to be able to empathise with their

situations and to gain their respect early by demonstrating that the trainers are skilled experts and that this is a potentially useful workshop.

How can trainers measure successes and failures on both a short-term and a long-term basis?

During the workshop, the trainers should observe trainee receptivity and participation, especially whether they pose and answer questions of their own? The trainers should always remain aware of the “mood” in the workshop. Also, time should be allotted near the end of the workshop, to distribute evaluation forms for the trainees to complete prior to leaving.

For long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of an in-service training, it is essential to ask for feedback from the school and the workshop participants. With specific goals, each workshop can be evaluated via the evaluation forms, and course-corrections made over time. Useful questions could be: Can administrators and parents see a difference in the teachers or the classrooms? Are the students learning more? Is the atmosphere in the classroom less stressful? Are the classrooms more attractive and more conducive to learning? Do the parents participate more in their children’s education? Do the parents feel better about the school? Is there better communication between parents, teachers and administrators? Are the materials, which the teachers were taught how to use being used in the classroom? Are they being used effectively?

Barbara McLetchie believes in setting timelines as a way of measuring both successes and failures. According to her, if people are actively involved in the program, that is a measurement of success. “Sometimes change is slow and we have to accept that. The involvement of families in these programs may also facilitate success.”

Is there any need for follow-up in-service training?

Knowledge is dynamic; therefore, trainees should always be up to date with new and functional information. Follow-up in-service training supports change that the trainer is striving to effect. The aim of, and indeed usefulness of follow-up in-service training is to consult with and give support on the practical implementation of programs. Workshops or in-service training empowers teachers in many different ways. This may range from knowledge to skills, competency to positive instruction, etc.

INTERVIEWEES’ REMARKS

During the interviews, the education and life of visually impaired person with multiple disabilities was discussed in general. The author received a strong sense that all people working in this field are hoping for improvement in both the quantity and quality of programs available to these students and their families. We have not yet reached the stage where both private and public schools offer adequate and appropriate services to students with multiple disabilities. In the coming years, there must be better programs

and funding to attract better-qualified staff to help the multiply disabled to live more productive lives. Furthermore, universities should be encouraged to respect and devote more resources to teacher training. Barbara McLetchie suggested that the profession of teaching students with low incidence disabilities should be accorded more respect and stature. This could be done by raising salaries and devoting the monetary and physical support, which these teachers need to perform their job well. Perhaps this would encourage teachers to enter this field and alleviate the teacher shortage, so that all children who are visually impaired and multiply disabled, “have access to at least a consultant who understands their unique needs” (McLetchie).

Everyone desires that visually impaired students with multiple disabilities should lead fully integrated lives as adults in their communities, be involved in activities and above all, be productive members of society. Alyssa Kimmel argued that all people have social lives no matter what level of disability they have. They should have all the support they need in order to do so to the best of their ability.

CONCLUSION

In-service training helps people working with visually impaired students with multiple disabilities by cementing their confidence and competence. This system plays an instrumental role in helping service providers keep abreast of changes in their respective fields. It is an inexpensive and efficient way for experts to provide substantial support to practitioners.

In-service training is meant to increase teachers’ and other service providers’ exposure to the best education and learning strategies, to better methods and skills for supporting and mediating on behalf of students, to ideas for finding and improving school based opportunities, and to practical ways for increasing students access to social activities.

In addition, in-service training offers teachers and other service providers an opportunity to network with others so that concerns about educational problems for visually impaired students with multiple disabilities can effectively be addressed.

In-service training can sometimes facilitate internal changes in a teacher, which in turn makes it possible for them to approach their work positively and thus improve the lives of the students. As McLetchie put it, “The real beneficiaries of in-service training should be the children with visual impairments and multiple disabilities”.

Sometimes teachers and other service providers lose sight of this concept. We must not forget that in-service training is critical, particularly in developing countries, because universities do not always have the expertise to develop full-blown teacher programs. In this way, a shortage of teachers for visually impaired students with multiple disabilities can be addressed. By so doing, teachers, service providers and educational institutions

will be constantly reminded that the purpose of different services is to put lives together. It seems most people forget or do not understand this.

APPENDIX

The data used in this paper have been gathered from the following people:

Kimmel Alyssa: A teacher for the severely handicapped students at Boston College Campus School and a Masters student (severely handicapped program) at Boston College.

Luiselli, T.E. et al., JVIB, V89, no. 3, 1995.

McLetchie Barbara: A professor at Boston College School of education.

Miller Tom: The director of pre-school services at Perkins School.

Webson Aubrey: A blind person working as development and implementation coordinator for the Institutional Development Project (IDP) of the World Blind Union (WBU) in Africa, the Caribbean and the pacific islands.