

VACD Report and Recommendations: Prepared by Gabriella Vascotto **8/11/2102**

The key goals of my visit to four schools in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka was to offer teachers practical support in their classrooms for students with disabilities as well as evaluate current programs and make recommendations for future development.

It was a great pleasure to work alongside my teaching colleagues and exchange knowledge and teaching methods. Most teachers involved in the program were receptive to discussing and exploring new approaches in their classrooms. Conversations highlighted the need to develop individual education plans for students.

Overall, teachers were left with four key messages:

- Classrooms for students with disabilities need to offer a variety of “hands on”, meaningful learning opportunities;
- Students with disabilities need a holistic educational program that develops skills beyond traditional academics;
- Students with disabilities have very individual learning needs and therefore they need an individualised learning plan in order to successfully develop, learn new skills and most importantly achieve their potential;
- Parents have an integral role in contributing to the development of individual education plans and in implementing learning goals for their child at home.

At present, teachers involved in the VACD project face a number of professional and systemic challenges that limit their ability to implement educational programs that adequately cater for students with disabilities.

A significant issue is an overall lack of understanding of disabilities and how students with disabilities learn. The teachers need further training to understand the specific needs of key disabilities represented in their classrooms. In particular, I noted that teachers had very little or no understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder – a condition that is increasing in prevalence worldwide and that presents the greatest challenge for teachers in any classroom around the world. Theoretical training is not enough. Teachers need supported, practical learning opportunities in their classroom.

Teachers also need ongoing support to re-conceptualise education for students with disabilities. Traditional academic instruction based on principles of rote learning and repetition has little value for many students with disabilities.

Currently, teachers prepare academic tasks in either an oral or written form with few or no alternative activities for the students in their classrooms. This means that many students are unable to participate and spend their school day disengaged from learning and for some students this results in disruptive behaviour due to limited stimulation.

Students with disabilities need meaningful learning opportunities that will prepare them for a more independent life within their family and community.

The teachers need to learn how to create a classroom environment that engages students, builds on each student’s strength and interests and provides varied tasks for learning a range of skills.

They need to see effective classrooms in action because they cannot visualise the change being asked of them.

In my observations, teachers found it difficult to plan and prepare multiple activities and struggled to maintain learning momentum. A significant factor impacting this is the lack of access to observing and discussing current pedagogy and best practice within and outside Sri Lanka. Other issues are the range of ages and abilities of students in each classroom, the lack of teaching staff present and the lack of appropriate resources available.

The fact that there are multiple ages and abilities in each classroom makes the need for individual learning plans paramount. I noted that all teachers were aware of the strengths, needs and interests of their students but they had no formal process to record and develop individual skills.

Training sessions involved discussing and developing a process for preparing individual learning plans and a booklet detailing the process will be made available to teachers at the start of the 2013 academic year. However, a booklet in and of itself will not be enough to motivate change.

The process of observing and assessing student learning needs, planning individual objectives and evaluating student progress is new to the teachers and will require time and commitment from them. The teachers will need ongoing support in their classrooms to learn and become proficient at developing, implementing and reviewing individual learning plans. As previously stated, academic instruction is the focus in the classrooms I visited. Important skills such as teaching students with little or no language a system of communication is largely overlooked as are interpersonal skills, daily living skills, vocational skills and motor skills. All these areas of development are critical for students with disabilities and the teachers will need planned, systematic training to broaden their view of each student and what is essential for each student to learn.

The inclusion of parents in the educational planning for students with disabilities will also need planning and commitment. During my time visiting classrooms, parents were always present and willing to participate however, there appeared to be little dialogue between teachers and parents about student learning. Having said this, I believe that all teachers and parents welcome the idea of working in partnership to facilitate student learning but lack a clear process for doing this.

For some parents this approach may be a challenge as traditional thinking does not view parents in the role of educator. However, for students with disabilities, parents play the most important part in providing consistent, continuous learning expectations over time.

Teachers will need support to engage parents in the process of developing individual education plans for their children. They will also need training and assistance to develop a system of regular meeting and reporting times with parents.

Recommendations

Teaching Staff

- Disability Specific Training
Provide teachers with training and discussion about specific disabilities: in particular Autism Spectrum Disorder and children with significant intellectual disability.
This proposal has been discussed with potential trainer Victoria Liyanage from Colombo.

- Practical training in classroom management and implementing key teaching interventions for students with disabilities
Teachers need the opportunity to observe and practice new approaches in their classrooms. They need practical support to apply current pedagogy to their practice. They need practical support with arranging the classroom environment as well as support to plan activities that are “hands on” and meaningful to their students.
 - ◆ Teachers could visit selected special education classrooms in their region or in Colombo to observe contemporary practice.

 - ◆ Teachers could participate in an exchange program and visit selected special education classrooms for a week overseas: Singapore or Australia where there are VACD partnerships.

- ◆ Designated periods of hands on, practical classroom training via modelling by an experienced teacher of students with disabilities. This proposal has been discussed with potential trainer Victoria Liyanage from Colombo. Victoria could schedule ongoing periods of support over time to allow teachers the opportunity to gradually learn and improve their teaching practice.
I would suggest that each training period is at least a week long to enable teachers to observe, discuss, trial, evaluate and reflect on new approaches within a supported context.
- ◆ Teachers will need specific input, direction and training with how to develop communication skills for students with little or no language. This may involve teaching sign language or a teaching the use of visual system such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). I noted that parents of students using sign language were not able to understand sign language and I question the value of this.
I strongly recommend that teachers engage and also teach parents sign language or PECS so that students can successfully communicate at home.
This proposal has been discussed with potential trainer Victoria Liyanage from Colombo. She is familiar with implementing both systems of communication and can support teachers in this area.
- ◆ Uva province visiting teachers could dedicate more time to ongoing monitoring and support in classrooms. At this stage these roles are largely consumed by administrative tasks.
- ◆ Careful consideration should be given to the staff and staff ratio in classrooms for students with disabilities. Multiple ages and disabilities create a high demand on teachers. A quality program requires passionate, committed, well trained teachers with a ratio of one effective teacher per 5 students. Well trained volunteers are another option for consideration.

- Introducing Individual Learning Plans

The introduction of Individual Learning Plans is a new concept for the teachers. It demands time and planning. The teachers are not accustomed to individualised teaching as traditional education methods assume all children have similar abilities and therefore targets group learning.

Individual Learning Plans for students with disabilities need to be holistic, considering skill development in the areas of: communication, interpersonal skills, daily life skills, vocational skills, motor skills and academic skills. At present the teachers focus on academic skills.

- ◆ Distribute booklet outlining the process for developing Individual Learning Plans at the start of the 2013 school year.
- ◆ Distribution of the booklet to be supported by a series of training sessions. Trainer to step teachers through the process using their own students as examples.
This proposal has been discussed with potential trainer Victoria Liyanage from Colombo. Training to target:
 - i. How to assess student skills and needs using a basic checklist

- ii. How to use assessment information to determine student need in the areas of communication, interpersonal skills, daily life skills, vocational skills, motor skills and academic skills.
- iii. How to write individual goals.
- iv. What teaching methods and resources to use to develop skills in each area
- v. How to evaluate student progress.
- vi. How to engage parents and report student progress to parents.

- ◆ Uva province visiting teachers could dedicate more time to ongoing monitoring and support in classrooms. At this stage these roles are largely consumed by administrative tasks.

- ◆ A proposal put forward by Dr Kumudini Cooray is that teachers, Paediatric staff and families meet twice a year to discuss, plan and review individual learning plans for each student: once early in the school year and once midyear. These meetings would be scheduled at the school with a full day set aside for meetings. Each family could be allocated approximately 1 hour.

Specialist input would support teachers to consider and plan for learning in the areas of communication, interpersonal skills, daily life skills, vocational skills, motor skills and academic skills.

The structure would also provide teachers and parents with clear expectations and timelines.

The approach is collaborative and views each student's education as a shared responsibility.

- Regular networking opportunities

I recommend that teachers and Paediatric staff meet on a monthly basis to discuss individual cases, share ideas and share resources.

Resources

On the whole, classrooms were very poorly furnished with little storage space, no washroom facilities and very limited teaching materials.

I found the teachers to be very creative with the minimal resources they had. I also noted that several teachers were using their own personal equipment and money to provide suitable teaching materials to their students.

Students with disabilities require different teaching materials to other students. They need access to the following equipment that could be attained through fundraising activities:

- Bathroom and washroom facilities to teach independent daily life skills such as grooming, personal hygiene and use of the toilet.
Rotary's WASH Program in Bandarawela could fund this need.
- Playground equipment to develop gross motor skills as most children have difficulties with balance and coordination.
- A range of puzzles, books and concrete learning materials to teach new skills.
Rotary in Bandarawela are prepared to fund this equipment.
- Technology such as a digital camera, printer and laminator per classroom to prepare resources that support the development of literacy and communication skills as well

as visual communication systems like the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

- An iPad with educational applications to motivate and engage difficult students and those with very limited skills.

Vocational Training

It is important to plan for the future contribution of students with disabilities to their community.

I recommend that schools with Special Education Units develop a strong partnership with Vocational Training organisations in Bandarawela.

Also, it may be possible to engage local business and VACD well wishers to offer training and employment to students post school. For example, shelf packing, box packing, cleaning, filling envelopes, crafts, gift cards etc.

Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy Clinics at the Diyatalawa Base Hospital

Both the physiotherapy and occupational therapy clinics at the hospital have very limited equipment available for developing children's skills. Staff in these clinics have been impressively resourceful and have created their own make shift equipment using scrap materials.

Following a visit to these clinics, discussions were had to generate a list of essential equipment that will support children and families accessing these services.

Fundraising will be needed so staff at the hospital can purchase the following equipment:

- Physiotherapy Clinic

1. Children's standing frame x 2
2. Children's walking frame x2
3. CP chair x 2
4. Corner Chair x 2
5. Pillow set
6. Callipers and splints
7. Set a different sized gym balls
8. Squeeze balls
9. Various toys and puzzles etc., to engage students and develop eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills
10. Web set
11. Small suspension bed x 2
12. Small staircase

- Occupational Therapy Clinic

1. Children's standing frame x 2
2. Children's walking frame x2
3. Large therapeutic ball
4. Splinting materials and tools
5. Inflatable positioning splints for children's arms and legs
6. Therapeutic putty set

7. Hand exercise set:

- Digi Flex;
- Pegboards

- toys
- 8. Sensory motor equipment: net swing; positioning seat
- 9. Assessment kits:
 - Locta II Battery
 - Sensory Stimulation Activity Kit
- 10. Grahamizer II Upper Extremity Exerciser
- 11. Paediatric Assessment Kit
- 12. Writing Aids set
- 13. Scissor Assessment Kit

If possible, I would recommend that hospital staff purchase a few pieces of each item so that an equipment library can be established for families. This will enable children to practice and develop skills on a daily basis and will empower families to take an active role in their child's development.

It is my greatest wish that funds are made available to facilitate meeting VACD project goals and the recommendations outlined in this report.

All VACD project members are to be commended for their vision and dedication to children with special needs and their families in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka.

For me it was a remarkable and inspirational experience and I am grateful for the kindness, openness and warmth of all the people I met and worked with. My heartfelt best wishes to all.

Gabriella Vascotto.
Melbourne, Australia