

# ENABLING

# Voice

E-News bulletin published by the UDIS Forum

September-December 2008

The current issue of the Enabling Voice is for the period September to December 2008. From 2009 onwards Enabling Voice will be published as a quarterly news letter and it comes to your mail box in January, April, July and October of the year. The next four issues will deal with specific disabilities and the current one enumerates the growing trends in the services for persons with visual impairment.

## Growing trends in the services for persons with visual impairment

2009 is the bicentennial year of the inventor of the Braille reading system Louis Braille, who brought the first revolution in the education of children with visual impairment. Emergence of this system enabled millions of children with visual impairment to become literate and education of them has come a long way in the past century. The recent past has witnessed phenomenal growth in all dimensions of services for them. This article

enumerates the advances that have been witnessed in the services for persons with visual impairment and also delineates certain challenges that have to be addressed.

### **Technology - a boon**

The second revolution in the field of services for persons with visual impairment may be referred to the advent of technology. It has made the

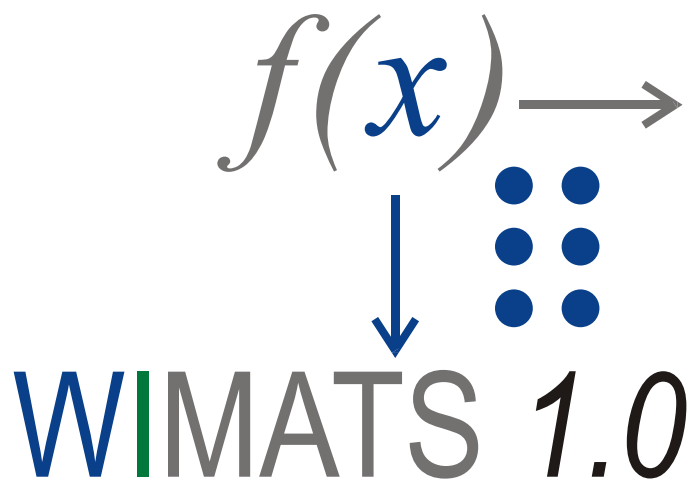




International Council for Education of  
People with Visual Impairment



Webel Mediatronics Limited  
India



*Webel Mediatronics & ICEVI Mathematics Transcription Software*

**Software for publishing Mathematics and Science books in Braille**

impossible yesterday into a possible today. Visually impaired persons in the past were not able to use computers, internet, e-mail, etc., as those adopted mostly visual modes of communication. Technology in the last two decades has brought in mind boggling changes. The invention of screen reading software like the JAWS (Job Access With Speech) have opened up the world of knowledge to persons with visual impairment. The technological developments are increasing rapidly. The Sightsavers Dolphin Pen is yet another recent development, which enables persons with visual impairment to access information from any computer used by sighted persons. Assistive devices used by persons with visual impairment too are undergoing constant changes to make them easy to use. The Perkins School for the Blind recently brought out a New Generation Perkins Braille, which is an improved version of the famous Perkins Braille. Technology firms are also sensitive to the learning needs of persons with visual impairment. The Webel Mediatronics, Kolkata and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) have brought out a Mathematics Transcription Software, which enables any sighted person to transcribe Mathematics books in braille format even if he does not know braille. This software by name WIMATS (Webel-ICEVI Mathematics Transcription Software) was recognised by the National Software and Service

Companies (NASSCOM) as one of the innovations in the IT sector in India during the year 2007. In summary, innovations and advancement in the technology front have opened access to services for persons with visual impairment.

### **Access to education - Still a concern:**

Though technology front shows positive results, access to education of children with visual impairment is still a concern in developing countries like India. For more than a century, residential school approach remained as the most popular and acceptable strategy to educate children with visual impairment. However the residential approach enabled only a limited number of these children to avail educational opportunity mostly due to the fact that the residential services were available only in major cities and education in such an exclusive setting made it costly. As education of children with disabilities became a human rights issue in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the need for integrated education was debated and the 1950s witnessed emergence of integrated systems in the western world and children with visual impairment started attending general schools with assistance provided by special teachers. Soon the integrated approach emerged successful and the concept started expanding in different parts of the world. Though integrated education worked well, it remained as





special programmes in general schools and failed to become a mass movement. Even today, the statistics reveals that nearly 90% of children with visual impairment in the world do not have access to education and more than 80% of them belong to developing nations.

Inclusion is projected as a viable alternative to improve the access to education for all children with disabilities. In this system, the general education plays a key role in providing the essential skills to children with disabilities and therefore, general classroom teachers are sensitised to the educational needs of children with disabilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that children with disabilities should have access to qualified teachers and therefore, success of inclusion depends to a large extent on the availability of qualified teachers and support materials. Promotion of inclusive approaches would enable large number of children with visual impairment to access educational opportunities.

### **Demand creation for education - Vital to increase access**

Though inclusion and all approaches to education of children with visual impairment work well, the

real challenge is to bring these children to schools. Parents in particular need to be motivated to consider education as a vehicle for the development of children with visual impairment and also treat investment on their education as investment in human capital. Special and integrated schools report lack of admission of children with visual impairment every year whereas the general data reveals that there are large numbers of these children not having access to education. Unless the required demand is created for education of children with visual impairment, schemes and plans would remain ineffective. Recognising this concern in the field of education of children with visual impairment, the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) acting in partnership with the World Blind Union has launched a Global Campaign on Education for All Children with Visual Impairment (EFA-VI) with the major principle of creating a demand for education of these children. The campaign has the endorsement of world bodies such as the UNESCO and UNICEF and works closely with Governments, parents and organisations of the blind in the country to ensure that girls and boys with visual impairment have access to education.





The campaign is focusing on early intervention for all preschool and school age girls and boys with visual impairment. The term “visual impairment” includes blind and low vision children; children who are deafblind; and multiply disabled visually impaired children.

Leading world organisations serving persons with visual impairment over the years have joined the campaign and similar international initiatives augur well in the disability sector. The EFA-VI Global Campaign is spreading in all continents of the world and is expected to make a difference in the services for persons with visual impairment.

### **Low Vision - The need is acute**

The statistics world over clearly reveal that for every blind child, there are about 5 to 8 children with low vision who require special assistance in education. The concept of using residual vision is acknowledged widely in the field and teachers and parents are encouraged to create a visual stimulating environment to make use of the residual vision of these children. Teacher

preparation programmes at present focus more on blind children and therefore, they need further capacity building training in handling children with low vision. The teachers should also be oriented to the use of low-cost and high quality magnification devices to enhance the learning potential of these children. The Ophthalmologists play an important role in the clinical assessment of low vision children and teachers can work with them to make appropriate educational assessment of these children. Though not all children with low vision have the same ability to use their vision, individual assessment would help making appropriate educational placement. The low vision children who could manage with magnification devices or with refractive corrections should not be compelled to read Braille. The Hong Kong Society for the Blind has set-up a low-cost and high quality resource centre for the distribution of low vision devices to various countries and the availability of such facilities has made education of low vision children effective and affordable too.



## **Employment - the missing link in the totality of services**

Employment opportunities are eluding persons with disabilities in general and persons with visual impairment in particular. As per the recent data of the World Bank, not even 0.44% of government jobs are occupied by persons with disabilities in India whereas more than 4 lakh jobs have been identified as suitable for them. Among persons with disabilities, visually impaired persons are the worst affected when it comes to employment as employers are still apprehensive about the safety and working conditions in the case of persons with visual impairment. In addition, visually impaired persons too require additional skills in technology, communication, team building, etc., for augmenting their employability skills, which traditionally are not taught in formal educational institutions. These skills may be developed in the form of pre-vocational skills in school level itself. Therefore, there is a need to revamp the curriculum of schools for persons with visual impairment providing adequate emphasis on pre-vocational skills. UNESCO came up with the theme "Decent Works for Persons with Disabilities" as the caption for the World Disability Day of 2007 and this underlines the importance of employment to lead a quality life. The private sector in India is capable of providing more employment

opportunities for persons with visual impairment and therefore, confidence building measures have to be initiated in this regard.

## **Gender issue in visual impairment - Yet another area of concern**

UNESCO in its Global Monitoring Report 2008 indicated that while the enrolment of children in primary education has steadily increased worldwide, early intervention, gender disparity, and adult illiteracy are issues that require attention at the global level. The gender issue is a major problem in education of children with visual impairment. Among the children currently enrolled in schools, girl children with visual impairment are not on par with that of the enrolment of boys. International organisations are sensitive to this issue and therefore, reiterating the need for promoting education of girls with visual impairment. There is a need to introduce special incentive schemes within the nationally operated Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to encourage enrolment of more girls with visual impairment in general schools.

## **Visually impaired children with additional disabilities**

Though reports at the national and international levels indicate that incidence rate of blindness



among children is decreasing, it is also true that the number of visually impaired children with additional disabilities is gradually increasing. However, very few specialised services are available to serve these children. The Rehabilitation Council of India has introduced a separate course to prepare teachers for deaf-blind children and this goes a long way in strengthening educational and other rehabilitation services in this area.

## **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan - Opportunities abound**

The enrolment of children with disabilities in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is remarkable. The statistics reveals that more than 23 lakh children with disabilities have been admitted in general schools. Though most of these children are those with locomotor disabilities, the SSA has opened doors for all types of children with disabilities. The number of children with visual impairment attending the general schools is certainly increasing and therefore, general teachers have to be trained in using multi-sensory approaches in classrooms. Methodologies such as the Activity Based Learning (ABL), which primarily uses more visual cues, should not work against the learning interests of children with visual impairment as they are devoid of visual experience. Such visual

oriented materials need to be adapted to make them tactile oriented too in order to optimize the learning potential of children with visual impairment. At present, the SSA has clearly created an inclusive environment where children with disabilities experience welcome schools, but creation of the environment alone is not sufficient. The children should be taught necessary skills so as to perform on par with that of sighted children. Therefore, the time is ripe to capitalize the conducive environment for inclusion in the case of children with visual impairment.

In summary, innovations are growing in the services for persons with visual impairment but the real problem is to create a demand for education of these children. Public awareness is necessary at all levels. While parents and community members should be encouraged to develop positive attitude towards the education of children with visual impairment, employers should be motivated to provide employment opportunities for them. The innovations in technology should not stop just with the innovations but there should be concerted efforts to make the technology affordable. Research and development activities need to be promoted to make the technology reach these children.

**UDIS Report Card for the period September-December 2008 comes with the Annual Report of the Forum, which will also be in your mail box in January 2009.**

For more details on the activities of the UDIS Forum, log onto [www.davo.in](http://www.davo.in) We value your suggestions.

Do you want to write in the Enabling Voice?  
Send your brief write-ups on issues relating to disability to [udis@vsnl.net](mailto:udis@vsnl.net)

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(You and the Disabled)  
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