

Working in Bangalore and the state of Karnataka, India

Sandra David reports from her year working in India, from September 2016 to September 2017

As a third generation profoundly pre-lingually Deaf Teacher of the Deaf for 28 years, I resigned from Frank Barnes School after 26 years as a class teacher, and Assistant Headteacher for the final eight years, to venture into new pastures.

I went to India as a trainer/consultant with Deaf Child Worldwide, which is the international development arm of the National Deaf Children's Society, from September 2016 to September 2017.

Deaf Child Worldwide has been and still is working with the Bangalore-based organisation, Association for People with Disabilities (APD) for 16 years. Deafness is one of the four key disability areas that APD focuses on, in the rural areas of the huge state of Karnataka in southern India.

Karnataka, with a population of 64 million, is one of 28 states of India, a country with a population of 1.3 billion and which is geographically the same size as Senegal, which has a population of only 14 million!

APD requested training on effective teaching and learning pedagogy for their 85 staff – a mixture of Project Co-ordinators, Project Managers, Community Based Rehabilitation Workers (CBRW) and Deaf Role Models (DRM). The majority of participants were the CBRWs who work directly with deaf children and families in the far remote and rural areas.

After a 5-week feasibility study around the three large districts in Karnataka (two of which involved an 11 and a 15-hour sleeper train journey) in temperatures between 30-42 degrees, I devised a training plan for the year, namely:

Module 1 – 'Being Deaf'

Module 2 – 'Teaching and Learning Pedagogy'

Module 3 – 'Holistic Support for the Deaf child'

All the training units/materials/resources/activities were created with full support from my wonderful Indian colleague, who is a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) and take into account the educational situation of isolated deaf children, seen in the far remote villages.

The barriers and challenges were:

- that their training needed to equip them with knowledge about a much deeper understanding of:
 - general language acquisition and development
 - how and why it differs between deaf and hearing children
 - how 'speech' and 'communication' are two different things
 - the 'speech banana'
 - what it really means to be deaf and the huge impact on a child's life
 - Indian Sign Language (ISL) as a language in its own right and the language of the rural deaf children



- how the deaf child is greatly disadvantaged already, upon entrance to school
- the lack of effective and meaningful communication skills between families and the deaf child
- the lack of 'incidental hearing' and 'incidental learning' for deaf children
- the impact of the education system, where children generally start school at six years old without effective language and communication skills, and general knowledge of the world around them to be able to access classroom learning at school
- how and why isolated deaf children do not acquire language
- accepting each deaf child's baseline assessment results realistically (outcome is always between three and five years below age-appropriate level, dependent on age at the time of assessment)
- how to prioritise key areas of the curriculum to fill the gaps of the child's knowledge following on from the baseline assessment
- how to plan effectively for the 24 hours per year per child that they work with, as opposed to the 200-220 hours hearing children have per year!
- how to write SMART lesson objectives and understand outcomes from these
- the need to accept that it is unrealistic for deaf children to 'catch up' four to five years' worth of the

school curriculum AND the need to explain explicitly to management reasons for this

- the need to accept changing how they approach the curriculum and how they need to be SMART in all areas eg baseline assessment and results, planning long and short term targets, lesson plans, resources, assessment and next steps to show some pupil progression
- how to plan effectively for deaf children of all ages, who are selected to attend 'model schools' – these schools usually have between four and eight deaf children each, and CBRWs work with them two to three days a week.
- to understand the vital need for deaf children to learn sign language in order to start acquiring age-appropriate language and communication skills meaningfully, to gain basic general knowledge and access the curriculum – this can only be achieved if the CBRWs have fluency in ISL themselves.

The key issue in the Indian education system is that deaf children are categorised under the 'social care' system (instead of being under the education system, together with cerebral palsy (CP), mental retardation (MR), spinal deformity/injury and autism).

This is because there is no-one in the Indian government who is accountable and has responsibilities for deaf children and their education, in the education department.

There is a new curriculum for 'inclusive education' – but this is not accessible for the deaf children in the rural areas, as they are almost always identified very late in life.

Deaf children's linguistic needs are not yet recognised by the government. This has a huge and detrimental impact on their access in inclusive educational settings.

Although the central government has rolled out screening to each state, the main barriers are:

- there are no trained and qualified specialist doctors in deafness in the rural villages
- Panchayats do not always receive information from the central government via their local government – (panchayats being the smallest council and ultimately responsible for the remote rural villages)
- relevant equipment isn't available to test for deafness
- even when babies/toddlers/young children are tested, they are not signposted to relevant services afterwards
- those panchayats that work with local NGOs have mobile screening services – but this does not always include deafness.

This situation is better in the south of India than the north.

None of the 35 individual deaf children we met in the villages was working at age-appropriate levels.

97% of them could not name their different relatives eg aunt, uncle, cousin nor the different subjects studied at school. They didn't have the understanding nor the ability to re-tell what they did at weekends or during holidays.

The training included shifting the CBRWs' mindsets on 'rote learning' to a child-centred approach of learning, through concrete and meaningful experiences and a two-way dialogue.

Examples of the training that we introduced were:

- understanding and using open-ended questions
- understanding 'place value' and how to teach this concept
- planning and making links between different subjects to support children's understanding and application of concepts in a meaningful way (a cross-curricular approach)
- opportunities for the participants to feel empowered to raise questions for discussion and debate in the group (this was a very new concept for the group)
- a list of different ways to assess children of different ages and abilities, after each term
- a comprehensive list of ideas for fun but meaningful language development activities for children of different ages and abilities
- maximising the use of the child's immediate environment for their teaching and learning plans, in a visual way
- enabling lesson plans to show progression at the child's ability level NOT at their chronological age, eg a year 6 child working at year 1 or 2 level
- activities to practise asking open-ended and closed questions, giving instructions, explaining something, giving a maths problem to solve mentally, etc.

My colleague and I travelled into the 15 villages (covering a lot of children living in different parts of the villages) to provide top-up training on-site (often with me asking to finish at 8pm without electricity, with torches!), support participants with phrasing and writing long- and short-term targets for their child's IEP, SMART lesson planning, assessment and providing verbal and written feedback after each participant's observation.

We also spent many hours of challenging discussions with managers from different NGO partners, explaining clearly and concisely how it was unrealistic for deaf children with minimal or no language and communication skills, to achieve four to five years' worth of education in 20-80 hours.

We emphasised the vital importance of carefully selecting topics from the curriculum after the baseline assessment, to enable deaf children to acquire a strong and basic foundation in the 3Rs, as opposed to currently rote-learning and copying everything without any real understanding at all, at the end of their school life.

My working year ended with an intensive feedback report, targets and recommendations for APD to take on into their second year with my colleagues' support.

I am very much hoping this will be sustainable, thus eventually showing improved outcomes for the children, based on the participants' intensive training and practical work. ■



Sandra David is a Deaf Teacher of the Deaf, formerly Assistant HeadTeacher of Frank Barnes School.


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