

## Integrated Education For The Blind

Mariette Jansen

**H**ELLEN Keller International (HKI) is an international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) currently working in 39 developing countries mainly to improve the situation of the blind and to prevent blindness. It is named after Helen Keller, a deaf and blind woman who showed great courage and commitment in helping other people with disabilities. HKI has been working in Bangladesh since 1978. One of its projects is 'Technical Assistance for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind' (TAERB). The overall goal of TAERB is to provide technical assistance to both governmental and non-governmental organizations which provide services to the blind.

In Bangladesh, it is estimated that 35,000 children become blind each year. Of those afflicted, 80% are from very poor families. Due to lack of awareness, inadequate facilities and poverty, parents of visually impaired children often are not willing to invest in the education of their children. As a result, the education

rate of blind persons is very low. To make education more accessible for blind children, the Government of Bangladesh initiated the system of integrated education for the blind in 1974. Since 1994 TAERB/HKI is assisting in this programme.

What does integrated education for the blind mean?

It means that blind children attend regular schools and share classes with their sighted peers. Currently there are 51 integrated schools throughout Bangladesh: 47 are run by the government and 4 are private.

Each school has a resource teacher, provided by the Government through the Ministry of Social Welfare. The resource teacher specifically addresses the special needs of the blind. Even though the blind children are spending most of the time in regular classes, the resource teacher spends some time to teach the blind in separate classes, e.g., to teach Braille. This is a system of reading and writing for blind people,

consisting of six dots which make it possible to write all the letters of the alphabet and all the figures. However, a resource teacher is not teaching only. He/she also has to provide information to the regular staff, to the parents and, most importantly, to the blind children themselves. Therefore, he/she has to be up-to-date concerning the latest developments regarding education of the blind.

Another task of a resource teacher is to be a counsellor:

- \* To blind students (by working through obstacles they encounter in integration and by other problems they are facing because of their blindness).

- \* To teachers (by assisting/advising them regarding integrated education).

- \* To parents (by motivating them to send their children to school).

Furthermore, in schools that are fortunate enough to have a hostel for the blind, the resource teacher has to be its supervisor.

A hostel is not often available for the blind, yet when it is, it makes it much easier for them to attend school. In the rural areas children often have to travel long distances to reach school, and for the blind this is an even greater impediment. They could easily become discouraged and then decide not to attend school. If there is a hostel, this impediment does not exist.

Integrated education for the blind is just a first step towards integration into the society as a whole. Until now, society showed a lack of willingness to treat the blind as respected members of the community. Therefore, TAERB/HKI is trying to support the Government's efforts to improve the situation of the blind in Bangladesh. After all it's not the handicap that makes a person disabled, it's the attitude of the society that makes someone feel disabled!

*(The author is a Special Education Advisor with Helen Keller International, Bangladesh.)*