

CONDUCTIVE EDUCATION DEPOSITORY

Training for classroom assistants

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June 2011

Note: Presentation to GRUNDTVIG Education and Culture Lifelong Learning Programme meeting in Birmingham, England, 21-24 June 2011

Date added to repository : June 2011

GRUNDTVIG

Education and culture

Lifelong learning programme

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I have worked as a classroom assistant. I hope it will be of interest to you all, and beneficial while planning training for assistants in the future, for you to hear how, as a conductor, I was able to make changes and influence life in the school environment in a way that had not been possible for assistants without my training.

I graduated from the Pető Institute as a conductor-teacher in 2008. In February of the following year I began work in Hungary in a mainstream middle school. The parents of a motor-disabled child employed me as a school assistant to be responsible only for the needs of their child.

This is how it was before I arrived

The child's classroom was situated on the third floor, but there was no elevator in the building.

When I began this work Linda, the then ten-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, sat at the back of the class despite her poor vision. She did not sit next to her classmates but next to the previous assistant. The given reason for this was that no one else would fit at the desk because of Linda's big wheelchair. Her classmates did not really have any direct contact with her. Linda had just one friend, not just one in the class but in the whole school.

During breaks Linda remained in the classroom with her assistant while the other children played in the playground and also when they went to the dining room for lunch. The reason given this time was because the playground is downstairs and the dining room in the basement. It was not possible, they said, for her to walk up and down the stairs.

The bathroom was on the third floor opposite the classroom but was too small for wheelchair access. There was a hand rail in the toilet but inappropriately placed so that Linda was not able to sit safely on the toilet, and therefore could not be left alone.

During lessons she was not called upon to speak, because she was afraid of „performing”, of answering questions and of the reaction of others. Because Linda did not respond to their questioning the teachers gradually asked her less often, perhaps just once a day in comparison to twenty times for the other children. Even on this one occasion Linda was afraid to answer. This made it difficult for the teachers to assess her real knowledge.

In the afternoons after lessons were over, when other children were given the opportunity to learn and play together, Linda was provided with a separate room. She was told that as she works in a slower tempo than the others it would cause distractions and that the noise of the others would disturb her. Linda's parents were

of the same opinion that afternoons spent with classmates or friends would have been a waste of time.

I do not understand why she was in an integrated school.

I set about changing Linda's lifestyle at school which of course also influenced her life elsewhere.

I spent a lot of time talking to all the people involved in Linda's life, her parents, teachers, and head teacher, and gradually we were able to bring about some positive changes.

The most important change that came about was that her whole class moved from the third to the ground floor they were given use of what was previously the staff-room.

One of the greatest personal changes for Linda was that the school built a new toilet that was accessible to her in her wheelchair and had sufficient hand rails to help her to feel secure.

She was given a different desk to sit at which was longer, this gave us more space but not for me to sit next to her. It was more important that a classmate was allowed to join her there and she never sat alone again. Later she was able to sit safely at the desk on a chair with a pommel, giving the two children even more space at the desk.

The change of classroom to the ground floor made it possible for Linda to have contact with her classmates during the breaks. There was a terrace outside the classroom where many pupils played that was on the same level as the classroom. With assistance she learnt to walk with a walker and then to walk down stairs which meant she could walk down from the terrace into the playground and inside the school down into the basement to the dining room.

After the change of classroom and learning to walk there was no reason for her to be carried by her father and no reason for her to remain isolated.

When she went out to the playground she went without my assistance which gave her the chance to make new friends and to become more out-going, which was also apparent during the lessons.

Her classmates and her teachers learnt how to work with her and how to help her. This happened mainly because of Linda's increased confidence and ability to communicate.

The people involved in Linda's life learnt how to live with her conductively. They learnt conductive observation, conductive upbringing, conductive assistance and conductive teaching.

When I started this work, Linda could not stretch both of her arms. This meant she could not use her manual wheelchair to get around independently. After a long time she understood that if she regularly wore splints to help stretch her left arm she would be much more independent in her wheelchair. Gradually she put on the splint because she wanted this independence for herself and not because I wanted it.

The first time that Linda moved her wheelchair alone happened after she had argued with me and took herself off into another room shutting the door behind her. I waited outside until she came out again to join me.

She not only learnt how to use her wheelchair and the difference between being pushed or doing it herself, but also the joy of being able to be alone whenever she felt like it.

The changes in Linda's life came about because of the good communication between all of the practitioners involved. We were able to ask for advice and to give it, and in this way our knowledge and experience grew together to provide a conductive lifestyle for Linda.

I think it is important to train assistants, to teach them the competencies that they need in order to understand that they do not have to achieve everything all at once and that small steps need to be taken to achieve success.

Very often the people assisting disabled children claim that they do not have enough time for carrying out activities with as little help from them as possible. They believe that because the other children in mainstream school are faster, then the disabled child must do things at the same speed, or not at all.

Due to lack of experience and knowledge often assistants do not know how to develop a plan for the week. A plan that could include such tasks as walking downstairs to the dining-room just once a week, moving in a wheelchair alone to the bathroom just once a day, or doing homework while standing twice a week, and through these activities allowing the children the same experiences as their classmates. Just not as often.

Of course there is not time for everything but this is no reason never to do anything!

About my work in Germany

I now work in Nürnberg where we have many different groups. One of them is an afternoon group for school children who attend mainstream school. They can use this service on as many days as they wish depending on their other commitments and activities. Most come two or three times each week for three hours each day.

All of these children have a personal, classroom assistant.

Because of my previous work experience I find it very important to communicate with the parents, assistants and class teachers. We visit the children in their classes three times a year and to bring continuity to our work the assistants and family members join us in the group more often.

Some assistants attend once a week others once a month. One assistant uses this visit as an opportunity to practise using public transport with the child on her way to the group.

When the assistants join us in our conductive sessions we exchange information, share experiences, decide on future aims and now we can transfer what is learnt in the conductive setting into the classroom and *vice versa*.

One of the children has attended the integrative Kindergarten and other conductive groups since he was two-years old. In preparing him for school, and since attending school, we have worked on tasks that bring him more awareness of his own body and personal space. He would trip over, could never find his belongings and would spread his food, cutlery and crockery all over the table and sometimes even on the floor.

In conversation with his classroom assistant she has told me that the most useful tip that she has taken from our conductive group is the use of a table mat to give this child defined borders, so that he knows which space on the table is for his use, and to avoid confusion.

We have experienced that at meal times he has far less accidents with spilt drinks and messy clothes and in school the assistant reports that the desk is now kept in order. An orderly work place is essential for this child who has extreme difficulties with perception and orientation. The classroom assistant is sure that the child's school work has improved because she has been able to implement in school what she has seen in the conductive group. She tells us that the whole life of this „crazy professor” is more orderly because she has learnt so much while attending the conductive group that she uses with the child all day. She also tells us that she is now able to teach the child's mother too when she visits the family home.

All assistants need different kinds of help from us, some who work with children with severe physical disabilities want to learn how the child can move around in the classroom or how they can sit or stand to join in different activities. Other assistants, who work with children with social problems, observe how we encourage these children within our group to interact and relate with others. They are then able to implement this at school where it is so important for the children to learn how to

make new friends, play social games, interact and communicate well.

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