

**Speech for UNICEF ECD Knowledge Building Seminar
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**Keynote Speaker: Mr. Mkhusele Makhathala from the
Department of Basic Education Inclusive Education**

Personal Experience on living with blindness

The Programme Director, UNICEF Personnel International, UNICEF Personnel South Africa, the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Social Development, the Department of Women, Children & People With Disabilities, Early Childhood Development Specialists & Practitioners, Distinguished Guests, Organisers of this august function, Parents Of Young Learners or Toddlers with Disabilities (Deaf & Hard-Of-Hearing, Blind & Low-Vision, Physically Disabled, Intellectually Disabled, Mentally Ill/Sick, and Other Young Learners With Other Diverse Educational Needs), Ladies & Gentlemen, thanks for allowing me as a visually impaired educator to be part of this important and august occasion to come and share a few thoughts or ideas with all of you. I acknowledge the tireless, immense and committed efforts put together by the organizers of this function to conglomerate us in one venue at this point in time.

I greet you all, and hope that the rest of this gathering, you shall all enjoy to the fullest. The information and knowledge going to be shared here this today by ECD researchers, specialists and practitioners, will gain you a lot.

**I assume every one of you is aware that this function is about
Disabilities and Early Childhood Development, therefore I expected
everybody in here has got something in common in one's mind about**

“Disability & Early Childhood Development” to talk or discuss about this today.

Today, I have been given a platform or an opportunity to come and share some of my experience or previous knowledge about myself and living with an impairment or disability from birth to date. Despite the fact that I had a sight impairment, that did not deter me to learn like all other non-disabled children, who were of my age and school-ready like I was during that time. I feel very honoured to be invited to this huge gathering in this hall by the UNICEF organizers of this function.

I hope the little that I am going to share with you, will leave something in your minds to think about and also share that with other persons, who did not get this opportunity to be here today with us.

My name is Mkhusele Makhathala; I was born from a family which was just living just above the breadline.

My Mother, who brought me up, wasn't educated, yet she had an inborn care and support for me. Perhaps, what made her to be so passionate with me, it's the sight impairment I was born with; this made her heart to grow fonder towards me, but she never spoiled or overprotect me; she chastised me, when I did something wrong.

Now that I was blind or severely partially sighted from birth, I suffered a lot to find a primary school ready to admit me like all other young children, who were school-ready like I was. When I had to go to school at the age of seven years, it was an uphill and very difficult to be admitted or enrolled in ordinary primary schools in the proximity of my home. What caused the

difficulty to be admitted? It was the severe sight impairment or low-vision I was born with. My Mother and I managed to find a primary school, which admitted me when I was already eight (8) years of age.

One day, when my Mother whilst she was walking from work to home, she met a lady teacher she knew, and discuss my plight with her. After long deliberations, this lady teacher asked my Mother to go and enroll me in the primary school, where this lady teacher was teaching. She promised to take care of me, and try her utmost best to support me to learn; and truly since the year I cannot remember, I started learning until I reached Standard 10 (that is, Grade 12 in nowadays language).

I am praising my dear Mother, even after she has passed away, for if it were not her patience and long-heartedness to see me at school, learning like all other children of my age then, I would be nothing today, but just a person living on disability grant and a tax-burden only.

This means that parents having children living with any kind of disability, they should have a tenacious character, endure the hardships, and continue to find a correct learning space to place the affected or a disabled child in an ordinary mainstream public school to learn or receive tuition. Sometimes parents of such young children or toddlers have to be aggressive in order to create such equal learning opportunities for their young children with disabilities in ordinary public schools in the proximity of their homesteads or homes.

This takes a parent with a big and enduring heart to convince the teachers in the ordinary school that this young learner is ready to start at the ECD Centre, thereafter proceed to an ordinary primary school to start the actual schooling.

If the toddler with a diverse educational need or needs enters the ECD Centre, the practitioners and other supporting staff within the centre have to care and support the young child or toddler with a diverse educational need, and help him/her to acclimatize in the new environment, which is different from his/her home. Per adventure the staff in the ECD Centre or kindergarten could seek knowledge and information from a non-governmental organization to find pieces of advice how to help or support such children with disabilities to learn like other non-disabled toddlers of his/her age or ages. Such ECD Staff could seek some expertise from the relevant NGO's to offer them constructive thoughts and ideas to be able to help such young learners to cope with the teaching and learning in such ECD Centres. Thereafter with a solid foundation and support received from the accessible ECD Centre, could assist such toddlers to advanced to good ordinary primary schools in the neighbourhood to learn with other learners. . Eventually such learners will advance to ordinary mainstream schools in their towns or townships and receive tuition like all other learners without diverse educational needs.

During our times, when we were growing, crèches or kindergartens or pre-schools or ECD Centres were a thing for parents who could afford to pay for their young children to attend such facilities. For us, who came from low socio-economic backgrounds, it was very tough to attend such ECD Centres of those times.

Some of us were not lucky to attend such preschool centres so that one could learn how to hold a pen or a pencil, and write onto a piece of paper before going to the actual school in the neighbourhood.

When I eventually started schooling in an ordinary mainstream school at the age of eight years, because I was sight impaired, most of the teachers in those schools were not willing or very keen to teach me with other learners. They always sighed, when they had even to mark my books, for my handwriting was very horrible for them. Another thing, in those dark days, we used to be from sixty to eighty learners in one classroom. Now to pay attention to me so that I am at par with the teaching and learning with other learners, it was very difficult. I mean for my teachers in those days, to apply the principle of individualized teaching and learning for me being sight impaired, it was a “nightmare” to my teachers in those days.

When I come back from school with a serious complaint about my teachers, my Mother would leave her job for a day or two, went to the school to see each one of my teachers in that particular public school, and try hard to explain my plight and sight condition to them all; asked them to endure me, try hard to teach me until I am at par with other learners, who were my classmates then. It was not easy, but very tough and heart wrenching for both my Mother and I, but perseverance on my side assisted me to pass a standard a year, and went to the next one. Perhaps, I was not a dull boy, I had a little intelligence bestowed to me, hence I continued with my learning, though it was not that conducive for me to learn in that unfriendly and unwelcoming teaching and learning environment.

Sometimes, it was a bit difficult for me to remind those teachers about my sight impairment, when I noticed that they sometimes forgot that I was amongst other learners, and I wanted them to consider me, and also grant me

a chance to learn from the chalkboard to read like all other learners who were fully sighted. That made my stay at an ordinary school rather tough and uncomfortable. When my Mother heard such discouraging narrations from me, she would encourage me to try the best I could to cope with the situation, and also be a “cockroach who kept appearing in front of the teacher, seeking help and support to learn also like all other children. I eventually grow older and more demanding of the opportunity to learn, that made my teachers to be aware that I was present in their classes. They became used to me, and ultimately all accepted me that I was there to learn like all other children or learners.

for when my Mother told them that I was sight impaired, they could not comprehend that. But as the time went by, forcefully presenting myself at school; at a long run all changed for the good for me, and I received the support I needed. It was not sophisticated, for there were no computers with speech-synthesizers or electronic magnifiers to enlarge words on the readers or the computer read books for me.

Firstly, the teachers looked at my big eyes, and did not see the blindness in my eyes.

but something funny to them when I have to read something from the book or the reader, I always brought it near my face, so that I can manage to read it.

If the teacher is writing something on the chalkboard, I had to stand up, move slowly towards the chalkboard, and start reading and writing on my exercise book what is on the chalkboard, whilst I was standing about a half-a-metre from the chalkboard; I used to hear other learners in the classroom

complaining that I am shadowing the chalkboard, they were unable to see. I got offended, for it was not purposeful to shadow the chalkboard, but to enable my poor eyes to read what was written on the chalkboard by the teacher at that point in time. .

I had a big problem, because even the spectacles could not assist me or improve my weak eye-sight to be able to read my books with ease. It was a struggle throughout my schooling time. My eyes could not do much for me at school, but I tried hard to make ends meet. I struggled to see on my books or on the chalkboard though I had some thick lenses (spectacles) on my eyes. Life at school was an everyday adventure to me, hence I say my life was full of problems which I could not really explain satisfactorily to you.

My Mother was there for me, because each time I am coming back from school, she would like to see my slate or my exercise-books so that she can see what I wrote for the day.

Same applied when I was in the senior classes, using now the exercise books to write, she still wanted to see, if I am learning something from school.

All in all, it was not “nice” to be sight impaired amongst the seeing and non-disabled learners, but I had no other school or place to go to by that time; Even the special school for the blind and partially sighted was far away from my hometown, therefore my Mother did not want me to go to such a distant special school from home.

I therefore schooled in the local schools until I passed my Matriculation or National Senior Certificate.

Things were not rosy at all for me, because everything was a struggle to me, but my Mother continued to encourage me to keep on at school until I have something to live on.

It wasn't easy, but I tried to keep on struggling, but passing one standard or grade to the next; that was a big bonus to me as a struggling child or learner.

One thing I can say to all of the people who are here in this function, the parents have to be patient and zealous to support their children experiencing barriers to learning and development incessantly; show love and compassion to their children with disabilities;

Never neglect your child even if you see that the disability she/he is having seems to be overmuch;

Your invaluable support must be there to keep the body and soul of your child intact, and kindling him/her to try hard to cope with what he/she is learning at school.

To the parents having toddlers living with disabilities and other special education needs, please be compassionate to your toddlers or children; Show support and also participate in the teaching and learning situation of one's toddler or young child.

Keep encouraging him/her to learn hard until he/she sees the light at the end of the tunnel.

I say this from experience, if it were not the encouragement and unconditional love from my Mother, I would not have gone thus far in education and training.

Perhaps, I would be the tax-burden instead of tax-payer, for I wouldn't have gone far with education.

Each and every parent who is here today, ECD practitioner and/or caregiver, teacher, please attune in to a better and an inclusive realm of offering skills, knowledge and information to all learners with or without disabilities or special education needs in your classrooms in the public schools you teaching in.

Afford all various learners in your classrooms or schools with equal learning opportunities so that they become independent in life, and also become viable taxpayers in future, not tax-burdens.

Only very severe circumstances could make a learner not achieve the highest goals of his/her life to become self-sufficient and independent and fend for him/herself in life.

This today, the theme is about “Disabilities & Early Childhood Development”,

This is an altercall to everyone of us in this hall to take the teaching and learning needs of our children into consideration;

Be pro-active, think of other ways and methods to assist that young child who wants education;

Afford him/her that opportunity to learn in an ordinary school;

Make the learning space conducive and accessible to him/her so that he/she can also advance in studies to become what she/he aspires to be, where possible.

In conclusion, I would just love to encourage the parents of young children, who are having a form a disability, be deafness, blindness, mobility impairment, intellectual disability, mental illness/sickness,

rather love your child, and never overprotect him/her, lest you create a “sourdough” out of him/her, and never give him/her a rightful opportunity to learn like all other children with no diverse educational needs.

Create opportunities for your child to learn with other learners; Never overprotect your child, because he/she has a disability, instead find other ways and methods of supporting him/her to become a responsible adult one day.

Only under very serious circumstances, where a child with a disability cannot be fully enabled to live to the ambitions of the parents, then the government together with the parent and other non-governmental organisations will have to work together to assist the child and his/her parent to find him/her another accommodation, where he will be cared for and supported until he/she dies.

I thank you.