

A true inclusive education experience at Carel du Toit Centre on International Day of Education

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Coronation sponsors the full tuition fee of 10 learners at Carel du Toit Centre, the only learning institution in Africa where deaf children learn to speak from diagnosis to Grade 3.



A group of Grade 2s with hearing devices enjoy a language directed by Coronation CSI chairperson Mary-Anne Musekiwa.

Picture credit: Jurie Senekal

On International Day of Education (24 January 2023), the true meaning of inclusive education could be seen in action at the Carel du Toit Centre on the premises of Tygerberg Hospital where deaf children learn to listen and speak verbal language. The centre celebrates its 50th birthday this year and has been able to provide their important services to children from all backgrounds thanks to the funding of donors such as Coronation Fund Managers, who sponsor the full tuition of 10 disadvantaged learners from the school every year.

All their learners wear some form of hearing device and learn to listen and speak English or Afrikaans spoken language from early childhood. Centre principal, Adri Hodgson, said the school's aim is to teach all deaf children to speak from birth, because the first three years are a critical window for spoken language. To achieve this, it is critical to get all children in the country tested for any possible hearing losses from birth – something the government still do not mandate despite 20 years of lobbying from the education sector, Hodgson said.

The school was founded in 1973 as a non-racial, non-discriminatory school for deaf children from all over Africa, and now it is the only dedicated school for children who are deaf and their families from birth that teaches them to speak English and Afrikaans (not sign language) so that they can integrate into mainstream society.

Hodgson said the goal is for children who are only able to say one spoken word when they start at the school, to finish their first year there able to speak in three to four word sentences. Children at the school are able to speak, sing, read, write, and play sports just like other children without hearing impairments.



A group of three-year-olds enjoy a game in teacher Unidene Clarke's Beginners' Classroom.

Picture credit: Jurie Senekal

Denolia Pillay, former student and finalist in Miss Deaf SA who was at the school on International Day of Education to show her support and showcase what the embodiment of inclusive education looks like, is now 23 and studying psychology at Unisa. Inspired by her former teachers from Carel du Toit Centre in the early 2000s, five of whom are still with the school, she hopes to work in the education sector one day.

Board chairperson Prof Diane Bell, who has a specialist interest in inclusivity and who is on the Presidential Working Group on Disability for South Africa, and consults to the World Health Organisation on Inclusive Education, said inclusive education was still severely lacking in SA. “We still don't have laws, universal healthcare or a school system that guarantee inclusive education, and critically, we're still not testing all children for hearing impairments at birth. South Africa needs an integrated approach to the challenges of disability.”



Grade 2s with hearing devices sing a song with their principal, Adri Hodgson, who is a specialised teacher for hearing impaired children.

Picture credit: Jurie Senekal

“We need increased funding from national and local authorities to provide assistive technology. We need human resources

(teachers and other services) to support the needs of children with disability, with a clear plan to improve learning and teacher capacity in mainstream schools. We need to prioritise child protection interventions, community engagement and awareness raising around stigma and discrimination. We also need better data on the number of children with disabilities, and their challenges and dropout rates so that we can plan and budget for their educational inclusion.”



Grade 2s with hearing aids are enjoying a giggle in class, during specialised lesson where they interact with spoken language.

Picture credit: Jurie Senekal

Mary-Anne Musekiwa, CFO and chairperson of the Corporate Social Investment Committee at Coronation, said the company has been investing in the education of learners at Carel du Toit Centre since 2017 because it had a “real long-term transformative impact” on these learners’ lives. “As a long-term investment in people, inclusive education makes a real difference in their lives. It really is an incredibly important cause to invest in, because it is so transformative and lasting.”

The Carel du Toit Centre fundraises for all elements of their learners’ needs, from their batteries for their hearing devices to their transport, nutrition and education. The centre has two residences for families who had to move to Cape Town to enable their children to learn at the school.

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