

Partners for A Greater Voice, Inc.

Making the world a bigger place for a child with hearing loss

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Think Locally while Acting Globally, *Joanne N. Travers, MIM*

Considerations for Building Sustainable Hearing Health and Habilitation:

- Assess and identify priority needs.
- Identify Change Agents within a community and develop their leadership abilities.
- Seek culturally sensitive experts in the field that can help you reach your objectives and goals.
- Incrementally transfer knowledge based on the mentality and culture of the people.
- Provide deep learning experiences that invoke a vision of possibility.
- Empower the people you train and hold them accountable.
- Work with and train parents and teachers.
- Foster progress through motivation; money, knowledge, good outcomes, a vision of hope.
- Encourage the people you work with to obtain local financial support. Support grant writing until someone can spearhead this work.
- Follow through.

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Daniel Bassett states, "Without consistent funding, programs start and then stop. People become overworked and stressed, and many don't stay in their jobs for very long". While this is true, the definition of *Sustainability* goes well beyond consistent revenue streams.

I work in the field of education and hearing habilitation for children in developing countries. My organization, Partners for A Greater Voice, has learned a lot in the "how to's" and "how not to's" of building sustainable programs in resource poor communities. Good outcomes in speech and language are goals for us, but we don't get there unless we consider initiatives that embrace a community of both parent and teacher. We don't get there unless we consider a deeper meaning of the word sustainability.

John Donne, a social entrepreneur once said, "No man is an island. Standing alone may not ever accrue human resources necessary to build sustainable programs". Clearly, collaboration is a key component in the process, and working collaboratively is what The Coalition for Global Hearing Health offers us. We've had over 55 volunteers who specialize in hearing health and a host of organizations support our training initiatives.

Sustainable programs in education require many things. They require a sensitive and careful look at reality. They require collaboration with experts in the field of hearing health, while embracing culture and working with the local people (both parents and teachers). Sustainability should embrace leadership development, capacity building, a transfer of deep knowledge, and practical learning experiences. All

the while, we must understand parents, the learning capacity of people and teachers, and the day to day realities in hearing health (political, emotional, and social).

To understand one reality I refer to, let's consider the hearing aid. Often times, uninformed parents and teachers have a false sense of hope regarding hearing technology. Far too many think a hearing aid will immediately solve a child's problem. If they wear one, then they should learn to talk. We know that language is a higher order event for the brain, and listening with a hearing aid or a cochlear implant device is far more complex. Auditory structures in the brain begin in the womb. If a child is born with some degree of hearing loss, and if their brain does not receive access to sound or speech signals, the occipital lobe takes over. And that's OK. A visual approach to develop language is a good option. But, if we intend to use hearing aids as a tool to facilitate speech and language, and if parents have a vision that hearing aids will help their child talk, then we MUST consider auditory development and education programs to support this. We must teach parents more than what a hearing aid is or how to care for it. We must instill value in the hearing aid a child receives from a humanitarian mission. Parents should learn as much as possible.

The concept of sustainability is vast when working to develop education programs, particularly in poor and low resource communities. Fostering leadership, working collaboratively, transferring knowledge, motivating, empowering, holding people accountable, and being cultur-



Supporting parents and teachers in the Dominican Republic.

ally sensitive enrich the meaning of the word sustainability. Content given at any training should stick and be well understood. Training should be empowering and content must be meaningful and pragmatic.

Building sustainable education programs is a process, and likely different depending on how resource poor the community we work with may be. Building strong, resilient, hearing habilitation takes considerable effort and necessitates leadership. It requires a substantial amount of time, devotion and energy. Programs evolve only as fast as people are able to learn and react.

When you enter a community in an underserved region of the world, consider the steps listed in the left column. This has been our approach at Partners for A Greater Voice when working in developing countries.

I remind myself that I must walk two moons in the moccasins of a parent, a child, and a teacher before truly understanding. I think locally while I act globally. The effort is worth it because outcomes are often sustainable. ♦