

'Finding a voice in a silent world'

At Canossian School, hearing impaired children learn to communicate orally

By Gurmeet Singh

EXCITED chatter and laughter float along the corridors and in the yard. The scene is typical of any kindergarten and primary school. But there is one big difference here.

The sound of silence would have ruled traditionally at Canossian School at Sallim Road, where about 150 hearing-impaired students pass through this unique kindergarten and primary school each year. These students would still be using sign language to communicate if it were not for its special Natural Auditory Oral Approach (NAOA).



Pioneers in a new approach to deaf education in Singapore: (from left) Varatharaja Geeta, Sister Anne Tan, Dr Morag Clark and Angelina Chen Ziyue

"The lives of deaf children have changed tremendously because of improvements in technology, in medical sciences and the knowledge of how an ordinary child learn language, Dr Morag Clark, a foreign consultant based in the United Kingdom, told TODAY.

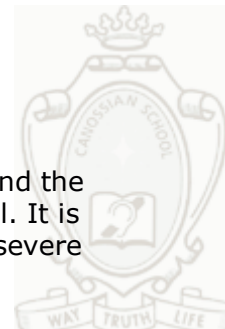
She visits Canossian School, a Catholic mission school, twice a year to teach NAOA skills to staff and teachers from other schools. She has been working with deaf children since 1954.

"Sister Anne from the school first saw me at a conference in Hong Kong where I showed a video on how we used the approach on hearing-impaired children. She said: "If you can do it in England, I want to do it in Singapore."

Sister Anne Tan, principal of the school from 1983 to 2000, introduced NAOA to Singapore in 1988.

NAOA relies on three basic approaches to teach the hearing impaired how to communicate. These include reading body language, using ear aids and communicating orally.

Canossian School is believed to be the first in Singapore to introduce NAOA and the integration programme, in which students are integrated into a regular school. It is also the first to introduce the cochlear implant programme for students with severe hearing impairment in 1996.



Before implementing NAOA, Canossian School used the total communication system, in which students were taught sign language.

"I found that children were not developing their linguistic skills because they were only signing. Our main aim has always been to reintegrate hearing impaired children back into society. And to do that, we needed to impart language skills," explained Sister Anne

When she introduced NAOA initially, it met with some resistance from the school's staff and parents of hearing impaired children. They felt that sign language was already an effective method of communication

"I told them to give the programme five years and if it did not work out, we'd revert to using sign language. There have been no regrets since and we are doing very well. Sometimes, it feels like you're in any other Singapore school," said Sister Anne.

This year, the programme saw 40 per cent of its students integrated into a regular school.

Angeline Chen Ziyue and Varatharaja Geeta bear testimony to NAOA's success. The two 18-year olds were diagnosed as hearing impaired when they were young children and joined the Canossian School Kindergarten's NAOA programme.

Today, they speak and understand what others say almost perfectly. They have just completed their O levels at St Anthony's Canossian Secondary School and plan to study in a polytechnic.

"At home, I have never used sign language at all. Come to think of it, I don't remember much of it now. All my relatives and friends talk to me like they do with other people," said Geeta.

Angeline said: "Geeta and I moved over to the regular Canossa Convent Primary School in Primary 2. At first, I felt very nervous being with other students. Luckily, Geeta and I were together until Secondary 2." When Geeta moved to another class, Angeline said she "had no choice but to make new friends. However, the classmates I met were very supportive and patient".

Angeline plans to do a design course while Geeta hopes to do accounting,

Sister Anne feels proud each time a Geeta or Angeline leaves the school to pursue individual dreams. According to her, it is important to provide the right learning environment so the hearing-impaired child can eventually integrate into society without feeling isolated or segregated.

"I would like principals and teachers from regular schools to know that they can approach us anytime if a hearing impaired child is not coping well in class. Canossian School would be glad to take the child for one year and then try to integrate him or her into the former school," she said.

