

# Cooking up a feast of skills

For the cooks-in-training at a special school in Johannesburg the exam period is a time to prove that the proof is in the pudding is indeed in the eating.

By [Namhla Tshisela](#) 9 Nov 2009

The catering exam for the pupils of the Sparrow Combined School in Sophiatown includes a delectable display of pastries ready for their teachers' discerning tongues.

Founded in 1989 the school offers practical skills training for 300 children with learning difficulties.

Pupils at the school are trained in various industrial skills such as engineering, catering and clothes manufacturing.

Mostly graduates of The Foundation School in Melville, the pupils would find it difficult to cope in the academic environment of mainstream schools, explained Lynette Leibach of the Sparrow Schools Education Trust.

"The skills they are taught here are designed to ensure that they are independent adults who can look after themselves," Leibach said.

"South Africa has a high unemployment rate and it becomes especially difficult for people with intellectual disabilities to find employment."

The South African Federation for Mental Health defines intellectual disability as a "disability characterised by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills".

Children with intellectual disabilities find it difficult to learn at school because of their limited academic capabilities.

Learning difficulties are due to disorders such as Down's syndrome, alcohol foetal syndrome and neglect due to abuse, poverty and HIV-Aids, Leibach said.

Intellectual disabilities are usually difficult to diagnose because they are not as "obvious" as physical disabilities. As a result children with learning difficulties fall behind in schooling, Leibach said.

Pupils at the foundation are assessed by qualified remedial teachers, social workers, educational psychologists and therapists to evaluate their educational needs.

Small classes with less than 23 pupils, speech and play therapy and specialised programmes ensure that the pupils receive quality education relevant to the severity of their disability, Leibach said.

On completion of Level 3 at Sparrow Combined School, the pupils can further their education at technical colleges or through learnership programmes.

Department of Basic Education spokesperson Granville Whittle said access to special schools for children in poor communities remained a challenge.

Whittle said though the department encouraged mainstream schools to enrol children with disabilities to promote inclusiveness, this was often difficult because of the severity of the handicap.

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