Inclusion for children with visual impairment in the mainstream primary classroom

Pauline Davis & Vicky Hopwood

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INCLUSION FOR CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN THE MAINSTREAM PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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This article considers how children with visual impairment (blind and low vision) can be included in the mainstream primary classroom. In particular, this article reports on an inquiry 'Including visually Impaired Children in the Mainstream Primary Classroom', which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The focus is an analysis of ways in which teachers can effectively include a child with visual impairment within a mainstream classroom. Inclusive practices are viewed in terms of promoting a holistic development of the child and providing equality of access to opportunities.

There are an estimated 23,000 children with visual impairment in the UK, including those with low vision and those who have additional disabilities, and 9,000 of these are in primary school (Clunies-Ross and Franklin 1997). Fifty-three per cent of children with a visual impairment attended a local mainstream school in 1988 and this figure rose to fifty-nine per cent in 1995 (Walker, Tobin, and McKennel 1992, Clunies-Ross and Franklin ibid.). Given the impetus for inclusive education this trend is set to continue. For instance, the recent draft revised code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs (DfEE, 2000) states that:

- 'there is a clear expectation within the Education Act 1996, that pupils with special educational needs will be included in mainstream schools... the Government believes that when parents want a mainstream place for their child the education service should do everything possible to try to provide it’ (p.4).

- ‘admissions authorities for mainstream schools may not refuse to admit a child because they feel unable to cater for their special educational needs’ (p.4)

Children with visual impairment often have complex needs, which call for accommodation by the class teacher to ensure that they are afforded their full entitlement to the curriculum (Arter et al., 1999). For instance, these children have limited or no access to the curriculum via the visual medium, and so might rely more on their hearing and touch senses to assimilate information. Children with visual impairment can quickly become visually fatigued when concentrating on school work for sustained periods of time and so may require regular periods to rest their eyes. Current research also indicates that reading through Braille imposes significant cognitive demands for blind children compared with their sighted age-peers who read through print (Greaney, Tobin and Hill, 1999). Furthermore, a child with severe visual impairment is likely to
require additional support in developing social and life skills. For instance, Webster and Roe (1998) have highlighted the importance of social encounters to promote visually impaired children's cognitive and linguistic as well as social development.

Teaching a child who is blind or has low vision can, therefore, present new challenges for the class teacher in a mainstream school. However, how can teachers effectively include a child who is visually impaired in a class alongside, perhaps, thirty sighted peers? This paper reports on an on-going inquiry funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, ROO0 22 3108 'Including Visually Impaired Children in The Mainstream Primary Classroom'. Our aim in writing this paper is to illuminate understanding about developing inclusive teaching practices for children who are visually impaired in mainstream primary schools, and to identify barriers to their participation and learning in the mainstream classroom.

**Method**

This inquiry comprises case studies of seventeen mainstream primary schools selected in conjunction with the services responsible for visual impairment in six Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in the North West of England. These are intended to illuminate the practices in the seventeen participating schools. In each school, interviews were conducted, as far as possible, with all staff who had a stake in the education of the child with a visual impairment in the school. We, therefore, interviewed the Head Teacher, the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), visiting teacher (peripatetic teacher), Learning Support Assistant (LSA) e.g. classroom assistant and class teacher in each school. Over eighty interviews were conducted in total. In addition, we observed the class teacher, LSA and visiting teacher working with the child with visual impairment. Whenever possible, the observation sessions were followed by informal discussions with the teachers, which concentrated on their understandings and interpretations of the classroom situation (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

There is considerable variation in policies and practices regarding inclusion between LEAs (Ainscow, Farrell and Tweddele 1999). Hence, in this inquiry LEAs were selected to reflect a variety of policies for the provision of children with visual impairment. Access to the schools was made in conjunction with the service responsible for visual impairment in each LEA and schools were selected to provide access to children with a wide range of visual impairments, ages and abilities. Thirteen of the seventeen schools were mainstream schools without an additional attached unit or resource base for the visually impaired. Of the remaining four schools, one housed the area resource base for children with visual impairment, one was resourced specifically for pupils with a visual impairment and two schools were resourced for children with different special educational needs; for example, one had a moderate learning difficulties (MLD) unit.

We focused on twenty-three children for the research, twelve boys and eleven girls. The children ranged in age from 4-12 years of age. Five of the children were Braille users. Three of the children had documented additional difficulties. Most of the children we visited attended their local mainstream primary.

**Promoting Independence and Equality of Opportunity**

Central to our thinking about inclusive practice is a holistic view of the development of the child. This we view in terms of the child's access to the curriculum, his or her social inclusion in the classroom and developing independence. For children with visual impairment, a number of features seem to be important in promoting inclusion in the classroom. In the schools we visited an additional curriculum was provided (usually by the visiting teacher) to meet the specific needs of the child. For example, mobility, tactile awareness and life skills; we define the additional curriculum as the skills, knowledge and behaviour needed to facilitate the child's access to the main curriculum and to promote social inclusion amongst peers, and more widely in society. Furthermore, it seemed essential that delivery of the curriculum was tailored specifically for the child's visual impairment. Also, for some children
support for developing skills for interaction with others was important. This conception and framework of inclusion for children with visual impairment in primary schools is illustrated below.

In this article we provide a discussion of each of the three ways in which the objectives presented in the framework can be achieved. However, it is not always possible to consider each of these elements in isolation, as many are inter-related. For instance, when discussing the additional curriculum, which is often delivered in a withdrawal situation, it is important to take account of other factors; e.g. how communication between staff can seek to consolidate these skills within the mainstream classroom.

The Additional Curriculum

Additional skills training is usually provided by a visiting teacher. Mobility training must be provided by a qualified mobility officer, for instance. However, it is possible for mainstream class teachers and others to provide opportunities that reinforce the children’s mobility in the classroom. For such inclusive practices to take place requires that the class teacher, learning support assistant and visiting teacher have the opportunity to meet, discuss and plan for the child’s development, at least to make sure that they are all aware of the child’s additional needs and how these can be adapted for within the mainstream lesson.

In the schools we visited, additional skills were predominantly taught in periods of withdrawal from the main classroom. Throughout the investigation we encountered a commonly held belief amongst the participants that it was not appropriate to teach some skills such as mobility, life skills and the initial stages of learning Braille in the main classroom. For example, teaching a child to tie a shoelace in the mainstream classroom was believed to be incongruent and likely to cause the child embarrassment.

However, where staff were able to communicate and discuss and, hence, collaborate more as a team, there was an increased evidence of reinforcement of these skills in the mainstream classroom. Examples of inclusive practice included providing opportunities for the child to use the skills he or she was developing out of class in the main classroom or more widely in the school. For example, mobility and orientation skills could be reinforced by sending the child with a message for another teacher elsewhere in the school, or sending him or her to collect the register, or choosing the child to turn the lights of during a demonstration. Indeed, where the child with visual impairment was engaged in the main body of the lesson, then withdrawal for a few hours with a specialist teacher seemed not to lead to the segregation of that child; this should be viewed as essential preparation to facilitate the child’s inclusion in the classroom.

Inclusion in the main classroom

Inclusion in the main activities taking place in the classroom is crucial for improving access to the curriculum and developing the child’s social interaction skills and independence. After all, the child can expect to spend most of his or her time in the main classroom. The following features of practice seemed most significant in removing barriers to the participation and learning of the child with visual impairment:

- the LSA working in a ways to facilitate the development of the child’s independence; for instance, by also working with other children perhaps in a small group with the child with visual impairment;
- curriculum delivery via non-visual means in addition to a visually based presentation;
- frequent use of participatory teaching methods;
- clearly adapted teaching materials that the child with visual impairment can understand (usually intended for use with whole class);
- the child with visual impairment positioned within the class so as to facilitate interaction with others.

In addition, the draft new code of practice (DfEE, 2000) states that ‘for some children [with visual impairment] the inability to take part fully in school life causes significant emotional stress or physical fatigue. Many of these children and young people will require some of the following:

- flexible teaching arrangements
- appropriate seating, acoustic conditioning and lighting
- adaptations to the physical environment of the school
- adaptations to school policies and procedures
- access to alternative or augmented forms of communication
- provision of tactile or kinaesthetic materials
- access to low vision aids
- access in all areas of the curriculum through specialist aids, equipment or furniture
- regular and frequent access to specialist support’ (p.65).
Two Examples of Inclusive Practice

The following examples are illustrative of inclusive practice in the mainstream classroom.

During one of our visits to schools we observed the class engaged on different activities in groups. Most of the pupils were working independently while the class teacher worked with one particular table on group reading. Present in the classroom was Samuel who was blind. He was doing a written activity alongside the children on his table and made use of an electric Brailler. There was much discussion amongst the children about the writing. This included the sighted pupils telling Samuel certain jargon and slang expressions. This activity provided an important opportunity for peer interaction, which, on this occasion this was facilitated by the fact that the LSA knowing the child was capable, had left him to get on independently.

Alternatively, Sanjay a boy in Year 1 with low vision and supported in school by a Learning Support Assistant, provides another example. During the literacy hour Sanjay was seated at a table next to the carpet where the rest of the class were sitting. The class teacher conducted the shared reading activity from the front. The class were reading a poem which was placed on a flip chart by the side of the teacher. Sanjay had his own enlarged copy of the text, which was placed on a work stand on his desk. The LSA sat next to Sanjay, but at the far side of the room, so as not to separate the child from his peer group. The class teacher used a pointer to highlight the words in the text as the class read together. The LSA had an identical pointer which she used in the same way to highlight the words of the text on Sanjay's own copy. The class teacher took full responsibility for Sanjay and checked he was following and keeping up. During class discussion, the class teacher allowed plenty of time before seeking answers to questions. In this way Sanjay, with the help of his LSA, when needed, was able to access the lesson and to provide answers equally alongside his peers.

We consider this to be inclusive practice because Sanjay:

- is part of the main lesson;
- the LSA provide supplementary but not the sole input;
- other children might also benefit from 'extra' time to assimilate information
- the class teacher and LSA are working in partnership.

Of particular benefit was the way in which the class teacher allowed Sanjay time to formulate responses to questions and to follow and access the text. This meant that the LSA did not have to reinforce work at the same time as the class teacher was addressing the rest of the class.

Other ways that learning support assistants and class teachers might work in partnership include the LSA acting as a facilitator engaged in group work with a small number of children, or the LSA taking the lead in whole class teaching, whilst the mainstream teacher remains in the class working with the child with a visual impairment. Indeed, we found that when the LSA role was viewed more widely the child with visual impairment tended to be less segregated from the other children in the class.

However, it would be overly simplistic to assume that simply removing the LSA from the child will lead to the child's greater inclusion in the main activities of the classroom. Of paramount importance, seems to be the extent to which the class teacher is empowered to take ownership and responsibility for the child, the types of teaching methods employed and the partnership between the teacher and LSA. The best practice we observed was when the LSA, visiting teacher and class teacher worked together in a team, sharing knowledge and skills, and diversifying in their roles. For instance, when the visiting teacher shares expertise about a child, e.g. about the development of mobility skills, the LSA or class teacher can continue with this work on other occasions. Alternatively, the teacher might sometimes want to teach the child with visual impairment individually or in a small group. At such times the LSA needs to support other children in the class. It seems that children who Braille feel more included when the teacher makes the effort to learn a little about Braille.

Variation in the role of the LSA seemed to revolve around the extent that he or she worked exclusively with that child. In some cases, the learning support assistant sat next to the child with visual impairment most of the time, as if conducting a tutorial with the child that was separate from the main body of the lesson. This way of working has been considered a pitfall of in-class support as it distracts the child's attention from the mainstream class teacher and serves to create 'a lesson within a lesson' (Welding 1996, p.116). Where teaching was in parallel, it seemed to be to the detriment of the social inclusion of the child in the class. Furthermore, this parallel model of working usually meant that the child with visual impairment was taught almost exclusively by the LSA and rarely received direct input from the class teacher. Concern was
expressed by some staff during interviews that the presence of a LSA could result in the child becoming overly dependent on the LSA, especially if that LSA is in the classroom on a full-time basis; furthermore, in some instances, the LSA could impede social interaction with peers. This concern about offering support within the mainstream classroom has been highlighted in previous research literature (Booth 1995, Welding 1996, Quah and Jones 1997, Lynas 1999).

**Communication**

Sometimes a significant barrier to communication was the lack of opportunity for the class teacher to meet and plan with the LSA and visiting teacher. Indeed, diversifying roles and knowledge seems crucial to the development of inclusive practices in the classroom. Although in many of the schools effective communication was in evidence, this tended to be on an informal or ‘good will’ basis. Whilst staff in many schools did make the effort to meet and communicate; however, the sharing of practice is not always on a formal and ongoing basis. Given the numerous demands on teachers’ time it might be that formal provision for staff development is needed if class teachers and LSAs are to benefit from the expertise of the visiting teacher most effectively. Although the government are beginning to recognise the time consuming nature of the role of the school SENCO (draft revised Code of Practice, 2000), more needs to be done to allow other members of staff, working with children with special educational needs, time to talk and plan.

‘People have to address the implications of how adults share knowledge, there has to be time for them to do that’ (from a class teacher).

We believe from our many conversations with teachers, that such a move would have the support of the majority of primary school mainstream teachers, as reflected in the extracts from interviews presented below:

‘I think the actual chat with the support worker was the most informative’ (from a class teacher).

‘Being able to go on a training course or something like that... talking to people who are qualified... who can give me some expert knowledge and it’s knowledge that I can then use in the classroom’ (from a class teacher).

In this research several factors seemed to be important in terms of developing and facilitating the sharing of practice. These included:

- a belief that the various staff involved, class teacher, visiting teacher and LSA should take on a number of roles in the classroom and should aim to develop their knowledge and diversify their skills;
- formal time assigned for communication between the visiting teacher, class teacher and LSA;
- a priority role of the visiting teacher to disseminate specialist knowledge to class teachers and LSAs;
- quality staff development and training for LSAs;
- the LSA viewed as belonging to both the school community and the community of the service, responsible for visual impairment;
- opportunities for LSAs to meet with and observe other LSAs.

We believe that developing the means for more effective communication between the class teacher and service needs to be prioritised if inclusive practices in schools are to develop.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this paper we have tried to map out some of our thinking about the teaching of children with visual impairment in the mainstream classroom. In particular, we considered teaching methods and ways of working in terms of equality of access to the curriculum, social inclusion and the development of the child’s autonomy. In the schools we visited, a number of measures seemed to be important for increasing the inclusion of the child in the lesson. These were:

- when in class, the child is part of the main lesson, e.g. not in a session running parallel with the LSA
- delivery of the main lesson content via a medium compatible with the needs of the child;
- whenever possible, teaching strategies are used that provide opportunities for the child to develop skills for social interaction with others;
- the provision of an additional curriculum to meet the needs of the child, specific to his or her visual impairment;
- the child is in the main classroom most of the time.

In order to develop these inclusive practices it seemed to be important that the team members worked cooperatively and in partnership. Although the expertise of the teams of staff who teach children with visual impairment was considerable, it is recommended that, where this is not already happening on a regular basis, measures are introduced to enable the visiting teacher to share expertise with the class teacher and LSA.
This paper reports the preliminary findings of this inquiry. In the next phase we will focus in more detail on the actual mainstream classroom and ways in which inclusive practices can be encouraged. This will involve an examination of teaching methods and the development of effective practice and partnership between schools and Services. We are establishing a Network of professionals concerned with educating children with visual impairment in the mainstream. A conference at the University of Manchester is planned for March 2001. Should you wish to join this network or receive information about the conference email v.hopwood@man.ac.uk.

Address for correspondence: Dr Pauline Davis, Lecturer in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL. England. Email address Pauline.s.davis@man.ac.uk

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Dr Pauline Davis is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Manchester where she is Programme Director for the Masters Degree in Special Needs and Development. She is director of the ESRC research, 'including children with visual impairment in the mainstream primary school'.

Dr Vicky Hopwood is a Research Associate in the Centre for Educational Support and Inclusion at the University of Manchester.

continued from page 40

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Philip Stephenson is a senior lecturer in science education at Homerton College Cambridge. He is also associate director of SCIcentre, a collaborative project between Homerton and the University of Leicester which aims to further initiatives in primary science Initial teacher training. Prior to this he was headteacher of a Cambridge city primary school.