

**Integration of students with a visual impairment
in mainstream vs specialized schools:
advantages and disadvantages**

Information Monitoring Summary

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The information in the following pages is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the literature. The goal was to make directly relevant selected information more readily available. Accordingly, not all articles or documents dealing with the topic have been reviewed.

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Integration of students with a visual impairment in mainstream vs specialized schools: advantages and disadvantages

Summary

According to various sources, about one fourth of students with a visual impairment (VI) attend a specialized school, whereas between a third and half go by turns to mainstream and specialized school systems. Children with VI who have multiple impairments or problems, especially if they give rise to complex needs, mainly attend specialized schools, as opposed to those who have only a VI, most of whom are integrated in the mainstream system. **The fact that students with a VI integrated in the mainstream system do not have the same profile as those attending specialized schools makes comparison of the two school systems difficult.**

Parents who favor the specialized school system cite the same reasons as parents who favor integration in the mainstream system.

One of the **positive impacts of integration** is that by mixing with sighted people, **the student with VI develops social strategies acquired for life, which may have a positive influence in the future.** But the student may face a certain degree of isolation. Social skills, however, can be developed through guided group exercises.

Access to learning for students with VI requires establishing modifications in learning strategies (adaptive or compensatory skills), materials and equipment, class and environment management (visual, sound, architectural; document accessibility; attitudes, etc.). **Coordination of internal and external resources** and a genuine **partnership between school staff, professional support workers and parents** are essential to successful integration in the mainstream educational system. In some areas, however, access to external resources is very difficult and may prove greatly detrimental.

Whether the child with VI is integrated in a mainstream or specialized school, integration of an **expanded curriculum including content specific to visual impairment** is of crucial importance (e.g. teaching and training in specialized aids and equipment, Braille, O&M, communication, daily living activities, etc.).

1. Integration

According to Brunet and Doré, indicators associated with successful integration can be divided in several categories, such as those associated with: student integration, the student's overall group, the teacher, the school, class organization and management [1]. Integrated students pursue the general program or related learning objectives at the same time as their peers. They are assessed in terms of learning objectives and in the general group assessment context. They are a part of the social relations network, participate in work and recreation teams, pursue objectives belonging to the collective project, and generally conform to community conduct rules. They express personal needs and are mindful of those of others. A group that succeeds in integration is inclusive, (provides for a physical, psychological and social place for every student), cohesive and cooperative. It is democratic and tolerant; every member is able to find his or her place. The class teacher demonstrates behavior furthering equal individual rights. The teacher is open to diversity, flexible and able to explain and obtain students' acceptance that being fair does not always mean having the same requirements for everyone. A school that succeeds in integration is characterized by generalized acceptance of the presence and participation of the student who presents inabilities in various activities (green class, amateur show, etc.) and school bodies or organizations (student counsel, social activities committee, etc.). It offers genuine possibilities for self-expression and being heard by all these bodies and in the same capacity as other students. Successful integration requires a transformation in how schedules, activities programs, assessment means and the responsibilities system are managed. An integrating organization and management knows how to deal with overprotection, rejection, avoidance or indifference phenomena and successfully brings to bear various resources needed in the integration situation.

2. Profile of Students Attending Mainstream vs Specialized Schools

According to the various sources, about one fourth of students with a visual impairment (VI) attend specialized schools, while between a third and half go by turns to mainstream and specialized school systems [2-4]. Student profiles differ according to the school system attended. For example, according to a French study aimed at analyzing the education and professional insertion path of people with VI graduating between 1991 and 2001, those having attended the specialized system assert themselves to be less autonomous in respect to travel, while those who had largely attended the mainstream system were distinguished chiefly by a less severe visual impairment [2]. Individuals who had alternated between mainstream and specialized schools were more autonomous in travel matters. In a British study based on data from 1997, half of the 960 students with VI were integrated in the mainstream system, while the rest attended specialized schools. However, the majority of students with VI (75%)

who had no multiple additional problems attended the mainstream system, as opposed to those who did present multiple problems (35%) [5]. This profile is similar to that reported in the Miller et al. study (2008), where 77% of the children in the specialized system had at least one other impairment (e.g. learning problems, language or physical impairment, etc.) or a medical problem. For the most part, their combination with the VI entailed complex needs [6].

As students with VI integrated in the mainstream school system do not have the same profile as those who attend a specialized school, comparison of the two types of school systems becomes difficult, if not impossible. In addition, the studies surveyed studied the impact of school integration of students with VI from a qualitative point of view (e.g. perception of actors concerned) and not quantitative (e.g. scholastic results).

3. Specialized School

It appears that parents who send their child to a specialized school do so for reasons similar to those who favor mainstream integration (e.g. support provided by staff members, school's capacity to meet the needs of the student with VI, etc.). What distinguishes the two groups, according to Ajuwon & Oyinlade (2008), is that parents who opt for the specialized school prefer smaller classes, as opposed to those who choose integration [4]. Moreover, the fact of not having a classmate with VI at the mainstream school prompts parents rather to send their child to a specialized school, as opposed to when another integrated student is present [4].

Similar results were found in the Miller, Keil and Whitehead British study (2008), where parents of 246 children with VI attended one of 11 specialized schools answered a questionnaire aimed at learning the reasons motivating their choice [6]. Among these children, three out of four had at least one other impairment or problem (e.g. learning or medical problem). More than half the total students had complex needs associated with the combination of additional problems with VI. Before being admitted to a specialized school, 44% of these 246 children had attended a mainstream school without specialized resources for an average of four years. Over 70% of the parents justify that the specialized school was more appropriate for their child because: it was better able to meet needs related to the VI of their child; there was the presence of other students with a VI; the teachers had experience with children with a VI. Benefits perceived in relation to the specialized school were, for the majority (>70%), the presence of specialized teachers; the wider range of technological aids available for children with VI; smaller classes; regular teaching in O&M and in functional independence.

Surprisingly, according to a Porter & Lacey (2008) British study, it appears that even in specialized schools, few teachers have specific qualifications for teaching students with VI, and consequently do not necessarily thoroughly understand how visual impairment can affect learning access [7]. Conversely, an American case study carried out in a

specialized school states that efforts were undertaken to improve teacher education and training, academic materials accessibility and quality (via established norms) and effective inclusion of the widened teaching curriculum more specific to visual impairment [8]. The means undertaken were effective. However, the study only focused on a single school and the results are not necessarily generalizable.

4. Mainstream School

4.1 Impact on Social Integration

School, even if not the only milieu of integration, constitutes an essential venue of socialization and insertion. According to Claude Tardif, cited by Brun-Lapeyre and Bonjour (1998), it offers three kinds of integration: normative integration, by imposition of conduct conformity rules; communicative integration, through multiple interactive exchanges, and cultural integration, through constant reference to society's values. [9].

According to the Veiga (1997) review of literature, integrated adolescents with VI develop socialization strategies similar to those of sighted students. They demonstrate a positive attitude towards their school integration, consider themselves integrated in their group and are accepted by their classmates in all activities involving the educational environment [10]. However, they may also experience a certain degree of isolation [10, 11]. For example, they may have a tendency to establish irregular relations and assume an inferior status to that of other students; they may be more frequently ignored by other students, receive fewer inquiries and, conversely, make more information and help requests than they receive; they may demonstrate a greater initiative ability for entering in contact with their classmates than the latter do toward them. The isolation may often be the consequence of a lack of information on the part of other students which entails among them a certain shyness, fear or pity, and consequently more difficult relations. For students with VI who have integration difficulty, the development of social skills through guided group exercises may be indicated and beneficial [11]. In addition, studies cited by Veiga (1997) show that the number of students with blindness well integrated in the mainstream system may be proportionately greater than those with partial vision [10].

4.2 Impact on Socio-Professional Integration

Integration in the mainstream school could have positive short- and long-term effects in social terms. In mixing with sighted persons, the student with VI develops social strategies acquired for life, which would then be beneficial for integration in advanced studies, employment, etc. [12].

Two studies on the influence the type of school system attended has on socio-professional integration were surveyed, but they are not recent and their results must be interpreted with caution.

The first study analyzed via a survey the educational and professional insertion path of 729 persons with VI graduating between 1991 and 2001 from one of 64 French teaching, specialized or mainstream establishments [2]. Results showed that the more people with VI exclusively attended the specialized course, the less chance they had of pursuing higher education and obtaining a degree, and consequently the less chance they had of professional insertion. Respondent profiles of the two groups, however, were different; those who had largely attended the specialized course asserted being less autonomous in travel, and those who had largely attended the mainstream system were distinguished chiefly by having less severe visual impairment [2]. The relation between the type of school attended and education is not, therefore, necessarily one of cause and effect.

The second study was carried out in the United States by Leonard, D'Allura & Horowitz (1999), among individuals referred to a professional placement program at the Lighthouse between July 1989 and June 1994 [13]. One hundred sixty-seven (167) persons answered a follow-up questionnaire an average of 2.5 years after reference to the professional placement service. Sixty percent (60%) of respondents had attended a mainstream school during the greater part of their education. Results indicate that, compared to respondents who had attended a specialized day or residential school, those who attended a mainstream school for the major part of their schooling had a 74% higher chance of having a job at the time of follow-up. Here, the authors venture the hypothesis that social skills developed in the mainstream school establishment, including students with or without impairments, are acquired for life and have an influence on obtaining employment in adult life. Results of this study must be interpreted with caution. However, as the relation observed between the type of school system attended and professional integration is not necessarily cause and effect. The study's authors did not indicate if the profile of the two groups was comparable in terms of the presence or absence of other impairments, for example, or medical problems, independence in travel, etc.; these variables may nonetheless influence professional integration.

4.3 Perception of Teachers

Integration of a student with VI may be a difficult experience for teachers in the mainstream school, as they often do not have sufficient training or qualification in this respect [7]. According to the Veiga (1997) review of literature, mainstream teachers seem predominantly to consider that incorporating a student with VI in their class requires them to resolve situations they consider abnormal, as they must accord the student more time than the rest of the class and multiply their teaching efforts [10]. The integration situation may entail a need to update the teacher's training in order to maximize the student's personal and social independence, but such an update is not

always possible [10, 14]. Moreover, teachers would often have difficulty finding time in their schedule to learn how specialized equipment works [14].

A number of factors, such as lack of knowledge, resources and administrative support, can interfere with successful integration of the student with VI. This situation may be all the more present in regions where support services are sporadic and difficult to obtain due to the limited availability of itinerant teachers and other professionals. It is difficult for the latter to offer services on a frequent basis when they have a high caseload and the students are spread out over a wide territory. Consequently, students with VI find themselves all the more removed from the potential advantages of vision aids and do not necessarily have access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive format [14]. Moreover, most mainstream teachers would be more open to and at ease with adapting large-print materials than stimulating use of optical or electronic aids [14].

4.4 External Support Resources

To optimize integration in the mainstream school, many children with VI benefit from the support of an itinerant teacher. Here, the place where the support service is offered seems to influence the student's socio-emotional situation. For example, according to García Pastor & García Jiménez (1991, 1994), cited by Veiga (1997), the fact that the itinerant professor works in the class with the student could entail a potentially problematic situation with other students and even a rejection on their part. The opposite may be observed when the student works with the itinerant teacher outside the class [10].

Itinerant teachers play a very important role for integrated children with VI. Due to a shortage of this resource, however, more and more schools are calling on paraprofessionals. For the past 10 years, this practice has been very widespread in the US for children who are multiply impaired, among others [15, 16]. The paraprofessional accompanies the child during the major part of time spent in school.

As a rule, the paraprofessional's responsibilities include: individualized tutoring; assistance in managing the class and computer labs; participation in activities involving parents; library or media center support; translation assistance; instructional support under a teacher's supervision; adaptation and modification of activities to facilitate their access; direct support to the child in daily activities via practice, and reinforcement of instructions given by other members of the education team. Teachers and parents apparently perceive this accompaniment as an essential element in integration. But paraprofessionals are not necessarily well trained or authorized to give instructions related to academic activities; sometimes they use inappropriate strategies or behavior (e.g. doing the work instead of the student). Their presence may have negative effects on the student's academic and social independence (e.g. reduction of the teacher's involvement, interference with physical inclusion in the class if the child with VI is seated

apart with the paraprofessional to not bother the others during verbal exchanges; social interference when the other students address the paraprofessional instead of the supported student directly). It is therefore important that paraprofessionals be well supervised and their tasks clearly defined. Unfortunately, it has been observed that they currently often lack supervision and their tasks are not well defined [15, 16].

5. Importance of Partnership

Access to learning for students with VI requires establishing modifications in learning strategies (adaptive or compensatory skills), materials and equipment (media), and management of the class (teaching techniques) and environment (visual, sound environment; architectural barriers; document, library accessibility; teacher attitudes of teachers, teacher aids, etc.) [17]. Most integrated students therefore have need of external support. Integrated coordination of internal and external resources is essential, as, for example, maintaining a continuous process of assessment and resource assignment meeting the student's characteristics.

It is apparent that a flawed partnership between members of the school and professional support teams and parents entails integration difficulty for the student. The difficulty may be expressed as a lack of consistency in providing services, a discrepancy in points of view concerning expectations from the student, the need for interventions or adaptation to meet particular student needs, providing access to materials and the opportunity for the student to participate actively in learning [12, 17]. Obstacles and challenges to confront may also emanate from a lack of cohesion and cooperation between professionals involved, a negative attitude from some mainstream school personnel members, and variability from one school to another in the process of developing an individualized education plan [17]. The fact that teachers and professionals who gravitate around the student are employed by various organizations who have differing policies and work practices may cause difficulties and constitute an obstacle to a successful partnership and student integration [17]. Communication and a solid partnership between all actors concerned are therefore indispensable.

Lastly, whether the child with VI is integrated in a mainstream school or attends a specialized school, inclusion of an expanded curriculum in the child's teaching program, with content specific to visual impairment is of crucial importance (e.g. teaching and training in specialized equipment and aids, Braille, O&M, communication, daily living activities, etc.) [18].

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