

# The Blind Teacher and the Socialized Classroom

GERTRUDE BERGER\*

**T**HE decade of the seventies will see an increasing number of blind teachers functioning in elementary and secondary classrooms at all levels and in all subjects. A survey conducted in 1968-69 revealed that 334 blind teachers were then employed in elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, of 1,940 blind students in colleges and universities (September 1968-June 1969), 813 were preparing for teaching.<sup>1</sup> As school systems recognize the teaching competencies of visually handicapped persons, legal proceedings are erasing prejudicial impediments.

The notable success which visually handicapped teachers have had in conducting their classrooms presents a challenge for educators. Edward Huntington's investigation, "Administrative Considerations in the Employment of Blind Teachers," found that these teachers were rated as average or above by school personnel in 27 of the 32 schools in the study.<sup>2</sup> When techniques used by blind teachers are examined, they present examples of teaching methods that are not only unique as compensatory measures but constitute sound pedagogical practices. These practices include the use of student assistants, exten-

sive use of audio-visual equipment, and grouping practices with concomitant effects on discipline in the classroom.

An outstanding feature of the classroom is the extensive use of students to administer their own affairs. Students, coming into a strange classroom, often feel like intruders in a hostile land. Difficult students are tempted to test the limits beyond which they dare not go and still remain part of the organized social group. These students will challenge a blind teacher even as they would a sighted one, and the need for effective discipline and good classroom management is a mandate for all teachers.

The blind teacher, using procedures in which many students are entrusted with the management of classroom affairs, constitutes both a surprise to compliant students and a disarming change to rebellious ones. Students rotate assignments in taking attendance even though the teacher has a braille seating chart (as well as a typed one for use by substitute teachers) and attendance cards with the students' names in both print and braille. The class secretary takes charge of the roll call and attendance sheets. In some situations, a student will report the absences in each row

<sup>1</sup> New York Association for the Blind. *Employment of Qualified Blind Teachers in Teaching Positions in the Public School Systems at Both the Elementary and the Secondary Grade Levels*, 1969, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

\* Gertrude Berger, *Instructor of Education, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Brooklyn, New York*

to the teacher. The students have responsibilities for housekeeping chores and the distribution of equipment and supplies. When one student goes to the chalkboard and writes his homework assignment, another student reads it aloud.

While blind teachers assume responsibilities for performing all the duties of a regular classroom teacher, such as conducting fire drills, hall and playground duties, they recognize the socialization that occurs when responsibilities are shared between students and teacher. The blind teacher's ability to function independently is augmented by his recognition that shared responsibilities support strong socialization processes.

### Technology Can Help

Blind teachers appear to be in advance of sighted teachers in their frequent use of audio-visual equipment. The equipment is used to supplement textbook work. The tape recorder has proved one of the most useful tools for both the blind and the sighted teachers. Sighted teachers, however, have not explored the various uses of small sets distributed throughout the classroom to the extent that blind teachers have. Use of tapes in such manner enables groups to work in various subjects, at different levels, during the same period of time. One blind teacher suggests that the use of the overhead projector focuses his students' attention far better than the chalkboard. He prepares his transparencies in advance and numbers them in braille for sequential presentation. A physics teacher, for example, may need to explain a certain concept to the class; for this, he and a student may prepare a transparency during the class lesson.

The sound pedagogical principle at work is that the teacher can involve the students in the learning process. The students are being taught in the most meaningful way, with the teacher facilitating the learning. When the blind teacher encourages self-policing activities, he is creating strong ego controls which lead to learning for intrinsic satisfactions rather than extrinsic rewards such as gold stars or grades.



*Photo courtesy Westchester Lighthouse, White Plains, N.Y.*

Richard Stolper, totally blind instructor of general science at Highlands Junior High School, lost his vision during his third teaching year.

Various studies on techniques of blind teachers reveal a tendency for the blind to move about the room more than a sighted teacher does. The preference of blind teachers for arrangements which encourage group work or study circles enables them to work comfortably with small groups. While grouping has been a recommended practice in many teacher education institutions, there remains a large gap between theory and practice in this regard. Large numbers of classrooms, largely at the secondary level, maintain a traditional row arrangement with the teacher conducting most of the work from the front of the class rather than among the students themselves.

The techniques of the blind teacher which foster grouping promote a socialized classroom which intensifies an existing positive interaction and diminishes antagonism which pupils in some classes display toward each other and especially toward the teacher. There are classrooms which resemble armed camps, with teacher and students barely able to restrain their warlike desires and with everyone on the lookout for the outbreak of hostilities which usually occurs on Friday during the last period.



*Photo courtesy Bishop Duffy H.S., Niagara Falls, N.Y.*

Samuel Lentine, totally blind since birth, is in his fourth year as instructor of chemistry and physics at Bishop Duffy High School.

### **Problem of Discipline**

In Dr. Huntington's survey of responses from 233 school administrators, investigating their reticence to interview or hire blind teachers, the problem of maintaining discipline was a crucial one. If any of these administrators were questioned about educational tasks which they fear new teachers will inadequately perform, their response would quite likely be "the maintenance of discipline." The problem has become so overwhelming that, in many schools, instruction cannot proceed because teachers are unable to challenge students so that they will contribute to a learning atmosphere.

Why then did Dr. Huntington in his study of blind teachers find that of the 32 schools in his study, only 5 reported less than average discipline? The blind teacher appears to employ methods which contribute to a well disciplined classroom. When blind teachers discussed their methods at a recent federally-funded institute, sponsored jointly by the New York Association for the Blind and the

New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped (1969),<sup>3</sup> the teachers repeatedly stressed that mutual respect and confidence were engendered in their relations with their students. "The need for respect and confidence" represents a facile formula long promoted in teacher education courses and literature. The problem is translating the formula into relations between a class of students and a teacher.

It is suggested that the goal of mutual respect and confidence which is at the heart of all classroom discipline is promoted in a blind teacher's classroom by the teaching techniques employed. The reciprocal feeling of responsibility which the extensive reliance on student assistants builds is a key in establishing mutual confidence. The teacher needs the students and the students need the teacher, and both attempt to satisfy rather than frustrate each other. The teacher asks his students to perform tasks not because he cannot do them, but because he has confidence that the students are competent and trustworthy. Therefore, since it is their classroom, they can manage the records and the equipment; this leaves the teacher free to teach. The feeling of mutual respect is further fostered and enhanced by the group practices that are employed in the classroom. The teacher trusts students to work as a group and to establish group controls and goals.

The overwhelming conclusion that one reaches from studying the teaching methods of blind teachers is that they are establishing a socialized atmosphere which contributes to discipline and diminishes the need for confrontation. In teaching methods, the blind can well lead the sighted. □

<sup>3</sup> The author wishes to express her gratitude for the information related to the institute to Mr. Ronald I. Johnston, Vocational Guidance Consultant for the Blind, Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped, New York State Department of Social Services.



Copyright © 1970 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.