

Teaching the Visually Handicapped in Regular Classes

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The problems of visually handicapped students, long excluded from the public schools, have begun to command increasing sympathy and attention in the regular classroom. Legal pressures for more equitable treatment, as well as the enlightened attitude of educators, have now brought more than two-thirds of the country's blind or partially sighted students into the normal school routine—with more to follow as state and federal laws are implemented.

The law now demands that handicapped children be educated not only at public expense, but also, if possible, in the same environment as regular students. And while the already arduous task of public education may be complicated by the special needs of these students, administrators and teachers are discovering simple, effective ways to cope. They are learning that the introduction of a visually

Teachers are discovering simple, effective ways to help blind and partially sighted students ease into the mainstream of regular classroom learning.

handicapped child need not, indeed must not, interrupt class routine. In addition, they are finding the presence of handicapped pupils may have a markedly beneficial effect on their fellow students. Many teachers report the behavior and motivation of sighted pupils often improve after observing first hand what blind classmates can achieve.

Another major benefit for the public schools is that it is far less expensive to educate a blind child in a public school than at a residential school or special institution. In some states the cost is from four to six times less.

As for the handicapped students themselves, early exposure



to a normal school and community environment better prepares them to deal with a changing world. They need to be accepted as part of the school family, to be given the opportunity to share, care, and acquire the same education as their peers.

But can the child see enough to read? Is he/she mobile? Can he/she see the blackboard? Does the child need special aids? Should he/she be treated differently?

To such anxious questions teachers across the country have expressed strong views on how to manage blind or partially sighted students in the classroom. This compilation of their suggestions may serve as a guideline for adjustments—and may even provide a basis for generating further ideas for the teaching of all handicapped children.

1. Do not panic when you first learn that a blind or partially sighted student has been assigned to your class. You may explain to the rest of the class, especially in the elementary grades, that one or more of their classmates has a visual impairment and might need some help at times with board work or reading assignments. Additionally, it is important to advise them that they should keep the aisles free of clutter, and doors should be either fully open or closed. Be sure to give this explanation when the visually handicapped child is not present in your

class. Along the same lines, a discussion about visual impairment and some of the myths and misunderstandings about the blind will prove helpful. This may also be a good time to ask for volunteers to read chalkboard and written assignments for the student. Otherwise, proceed normally in your day-to-day instruction and activities.

2. Seat partially seeing students in the front row towards the middle in order to avoid glare or direct light on their eyes.

3. Use yellow chalk to write on the board. This is a brighter color than white and can be seen more easily by students with residual vision.

4. A blind or partially seeing student may need an extra desk and storage space. Braille books, large-print books, and additional materials make the need for additional storage room necessary. Some teachers might provide a table or a work space in an area of the class where the student can work independently or with a reader without disturbing others. Visually impaired students should be allowed to walk to the chalkboard to see it at close range, but they should not block the view of other students.

5. Encourage visually handicapped students to explore their surroundings before, during, or after class, touching or seeing objects at close range. They should

be permitted to walk around the classroom and through the school on their own just as other students do. For the blind and severely visually handicapped youngsters, assign a student escort who can be called on to assist them in transit through school.

6. Employ verbal communication generously. Unfortunately, most visually impaired persons fail to pick up nonverbal cues in the classroom. A smile, wink, frown, or wave of the hand may be missed even by someone with partial vision. In the case of totally blind and severely visually limited pupils, such gestures tend to be completely lost. A pat on the shoulder, an arm around the waist, or similar physical gestures will go a long way in indicating to a visually handicapped student that the teacher is pleased.

7. Use normal everyday words in the presence of visually handicapped children. Do not avoid words like see, look, red, green, purple, beige, blind, partially seeing, visually impaired, and handicapped. These are part of the handicapped child's normal vocabulary, too. When asked to "see" an object, for instance, a totally blind child might feel it while a partially seeing child may hold it close to his/her eyes, but both are "seeing" it in their own way.

8. Be more explanatory while writing on the chalk board, demonstrating a lesson, or using instructional materials. Make extensive use of colorful words and descriptive language in addressing the visually handicapped. More than the normal student, the blind or partially sighted youngster needs clarity and concreteness in communication. Increased use of explicit language will benefit other students as well.

9. Involve visually handicapped students in all activities in your class. Assign them meaningful responsibilities. They should be

given the opportunity for leadership and to do errands like any other child in the class as long as these tasks are commensurate with their capabilities. A teacher's attitude toward a handicapped child is easily detected by other classmates. Whenever possible, accentuate the positive by showing what the student can do.

Most visually impaired students have some residual vision. In many cases it is fairly good. These pupils should be encouraged to use their remaining sight. Most medical authorities agree that it will not harm them. The teacher should examine a student's medical record to determine whether the use of sight is permitted.

In some eye conditions, vision fluctuates. Some students might see very well sometimes while at other times they might complain of haziness or blurred vision. Such students need eye rest, especially if there is close work involved. Students with albinism, retinitis pigmentosa, and other eye conditions have photophobia or extreme sensitivity to light, and many have eye fatigue. If so, sunglasses and shades are often helpful. The school nurse and the teacher of the visually handicapped should be able to provide medical information about these students to the teacher.

If there is a resource teacher or special teacher of the visually handicapped in the school system, he or she should be used by the classroom teacher who has blind or partially sighted youngsters. This specialist should be requested to locate materials for the student in braille, large print, or on tape; transcribe materials into braille, large print, or tape; tutor the student in concepts and areas not covered in class; help the student in obtaining materials for long-term projects and assignments; and provide other materials and equipment needed by the student. The specialist can be of optimal help if



the classroom teacher gives him or her lessons, tests, and other materials to be transcribed well ahead of the time that they will be used in class.

Instruction

Regular classroom teachers do not need specialized training in teaching the blind and partially seeing students. What is needed is for them to demonstrate an openness, flexibility, and resourcefulness in employing instructional strategies. The teacher may have to vary or adapt materials and methods in the teaching of the visually handicapped so that class objectives can be achieved. When necessary, the teacher should change methods, not objectives, for visually handicapped youngsters.

Regular teachers who have had prior experience with visually handicapped students tell us that most adaptive methods prove equally helpful for other students as well, and the teaching creativeness employed for the visually defective child enriches learning for the entire class. Furthermore, they believe that careful planning required for the visually handicapped may result in more thoughtful instruction for the whole class.

There are several ways that the teacher can administer tests to visually handicapped students. Many partially seeing pupils can take tests in the same manner as the rest of the class. Others, be-

cause they find it difficult to see purple ink on ditto tests, will require the teacher to prepare tests for them in black ink or pica type. Although a separate answer sheet is used with regular students, the teacher should allow the partially sighted to put the answers on the test paper or in the booklet itself.

In the case of students with severe visual loss, the teacher, an aide, or another student can read the test to them in a corner of the room or in another secluded spot so as not to disturb the class while writing down verbalized answers. If this procedure is used, it is a good idea to read a test item over again if a student requests it. Reviewing the entire test with students before having it submitted to the teacher may also be helpful.

If sufficient notice is given by the classroom teacher, most teacher-made and standardized tests can be transcribed by the school system's center for special education and made available in large print or braille. This center can also administer scholastic achievement and other college entrance tests. When the student uses braille to answer a test, it should be written over in ink. Answers may also be transferred to an answer sheet and returned to the teacher or person in charge of college board testing.

Unlike the regular students, visually handicapped students may need additional time to complete

tests. Regarding speed tests, the extra time assigned the visually handicapped will not influence their reliability or validity. The rule of thumb that could be followed in allocating testing time for braille students is 2.5 times and large-print students 1.5 times the regular time allotted for the test.

Materials and Equipment

Teachers should be aware of the wide spectrum of eye problems among the visually handicapped, and match them with proper learning materials and equipment. There are some partially seeing pupils who can use regular printed materials. For students victimized by certain eye conditions, however, large print is hard to read. Still other students may not be able to read ditto materials in purple ink. Furthermore, braille and large-print materials will be needed for blind and other visually impaired students. If the classroom teacher cannot find out beforehand the type of print with which a partially seeing pupil is comfortable, close observation of the student will reveal this. Some partially seeing pupils are able to use regular materials with the help of closed circuit television available in some school systems. Other students are helped by low vision aids and hand-held magnifiers. In many cases, live readers and taped materials may be useful.

Equipment, assistance, or materials needed for the visually impaired should be requisitioned by the classroom teacher from the appropriate school officials as soon as possible. Among the materials and equipment available for visually handicapped students are: braille, large-print, taped and recorded books; book stands for partially seeing children; felt tip markers in different sizes; acetate in yellow for placement over the printed page to further darken the

print for contrast; paper in black bold lines; bold-line graph paper; large-print music notations, page markers, and reading windows for pupils who lose their place frequently; sunvisors and shields for children sensitive to bright light; primary pencils and heavy tip pens; braille writers, braille paper, slate, and stylus; abacus, cuba-rhythm math slate; raised line paper; braille and large-print outline maps of the U.S. and the world; and script, signature, and other writing guides for the blind.

Other equipment includes cassette tape recorders; reel-to-reel tape recorders; speech compressors to speed up recorded materials without changing the speed; talking calculators that perform most of the operations in audible speech; talking book machines for reading recorded materials; opticon machines with which totally blind pupils can read printed materials by feeling sensations on their finger tip at a limited reading rate; closed circuit televisions that magnify regular print and objects several times; hand magnifiers; braille and large-print games; and high intensity lamps and other specialized illumination devices.

The Curriculum

A curriculum for visually handicapped students should be as varied and enriching as that for seeing students. In fact, there should be no courses barred to them because of visual impairment. Their intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and moral development can be best realized through an "open" curriculum. In schools around the country, visually impaired students should have access to such courses as home economics, physical education, industrial arts, arts and crafts, music, R.O.T.C., data processing, computer technology, office management, distributive education, and radio technology.

Vocational subjects should not be sacrificed for academic learning. Most visually handicapped, high-school-age students have been enrolled in technical, vocational, and career-oriented curricula. Large numbers have successfully completed courses in auto mechanics, horticulture, secretarial and clerical work, marketing, salesmanship, and food preparation. Additionally, these students have been enrolled in a multitude of work-study programs. Presented here are several selected curricular areas that should promote an open-door policy for visually handicapped students.

Home Economics

In home economics, blind students can develop skills at the normal rate of progress. No special equipment is necessary in most situations. Several items manufactured for use by the general public can be used by the blind also, such as pie cutting guides, metal measuring cups, and needle threaders. With other equipment, like stoves, washing machines, and thermostats, notches can be filed on the dials to help the blind student. Aids especially designed for the visually impaired have been on the market for several years. One such helpful device is the coffee probe, which beeps when the cup is full.

Industrial Arts

There are visually handicapped people employed in many diverse industrial arts occupations, including sheet metal work, electronics, plastics, auto mechanics, woodworking, and design. A large number of others explore these fields as hobbies. Participation of a visually handicapped student in an industrial arts program will help build self-confidence and develop a marketable skill.

Many specialized tools and instruments have been developed

for the blind. In most industrial arts programs, the one that is necessary is a measuring instrument. A "rotomatic" measuring device is preferred to other braille rulers because of greater accuracy.

By using proper techniques, visually handicapped students can complete their project as independently as their classmates. The resourceful industrial arts teacher will think of many ways in which other senses may be used as alternatives to sight. Making a mark by scratching with a sharp instrument instead of with a pencil, for example, is but one method of accommodating the student with vision problems.

The blind student is no more accident-prone than other students; therefore, usually no special safety equipment is necessary in industrial arts classes.

Music

In music classes, frequently only the words of a song need to be brailled or put into large print for the visually deficient. For many students, memorization will suffice, and no braille is necessary. When the musical score is required, as for the serious study of an instrument, it can be brailled and put into large print. It must be noted, however, braille music has a special code that is different from ordinary literary braille.

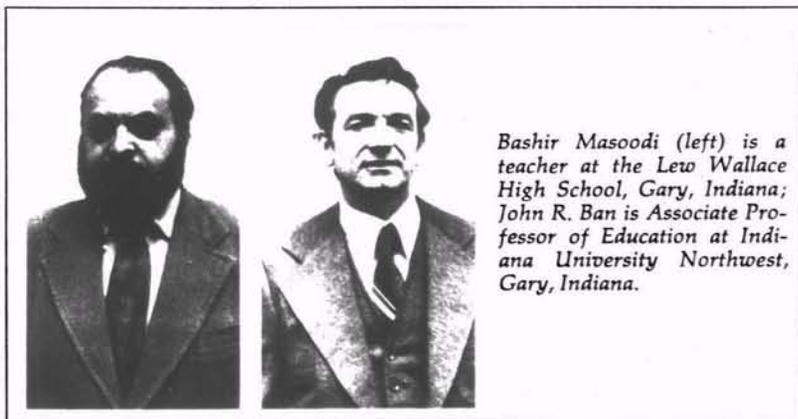
Physical Education

Visually handicapped students can be included in many physical education activities, but they should be allowed to choose their own physical education courses, especially in secondary schools. A wise choice will result in convenience for both student and instructor. In any case, that choice should not be a watered-down version of a regular lesson. The visually handicapped should be expected to meet the same require-

ments as the rest of the class and enjoy a truly equivalent learning experience.

If a particular activity is not beneficial to blind students or makes them uneasy, another form of exercise may be substituted. For example, they might practice weightlifting or rope jumping in place of a very fast-moving, highly visual sport such as basketball. A visually impaired student may profit from adaptive physical education classes if available at the school. In swimming, no adaptations are required.

Visually impaired students, like other handicapped youngsters, are discovering that the portals of public education are opening wider than ever. Teachers are the key factor in making usually handicapped students' sojourn in the school a lasting learning experience. As the visually handicapped filter into the regular classroom, teachers can serve them in no better way than to create an environment free of stigma and prepare themselves to handle those students in an effective and compassionate way. If teaching is indeed an expression of love, as some insist, then it is especially true in teaching the less able-bodied. Above all, it must be a love matched by a commitment to ensure a quality education for all youngsters regardless of their physical condition. *E.L.*



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