INCLUDING VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN IN THE MAINSTREAM PRIMARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM, R000223108: ESRC FINAL REPORT

Duration of inquiry April 2000 to end of March 2001

BACKGROUND
The Government's Green paper, Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs (DfEE 1997) followed on from the Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs (1994) in promoting mainstream classroom placement for all children. In practice, this has meant a movement from provision in special schools to provision in the mainstream, along with a shift from support systems characterised by children's withdrawal from the classroom to those that are based on in-class support. 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 had risen to fifty-nine per cent in 1995 (Walker, Tobin, and McKennel 1992, Clunies-Ross and Franklin ibid.). Although the proportion of children with a visual impairment in mainstream schools in the academic year 2000/2001 is unknown, given the impetus for inclusive education, children with visual impairment are likely to be entering mainstream education in growing numbers. Furthermore, this trend is likely to continue, at least, in the short and mid-term. 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).

Policies for the inclusion of children with visual impairment have been in place for a considerable number of years; hence, it was timely to examine the inclusion of children with visual impairment in the mainstream education system. Whilst research in inclusive education that seeks new knowledge and better understanding of teaching practices that support the inclusion of children with special educational needs has been in progress for some time now, the main focus of such research has not been on an examination of the particulars of practice for children with visual impairment in mainstream primary schools. To the best of our knowledge, no other major research in

1 Whilst in writing this report it is necessary to refer to a group of children with visual impairment, it is recognised that there is a danger in the grouping together of children with such a wide variety of conditions (Webster and Roe 1998, Arter et al. 1999). Specific advice about the needs of each child with visual impairment should be in consultation with a specialist teacher of the visually impaired.
the United Kingdom, apart from this research ESRC R000223108, focuses on the mainstream primary school classroom and children with visual impairment.

Indeed, research in the field of inclusive education, in line with the philosophy of education for all children, has tended to focus on all the children in a classroom or in a school, rather than on a particular group of children. In this respect our approach was somewhat unusual as, in the schools we visited, we focused on a particular child, rather than on all the children in the class. We would argue that through studying the inclusion of particular groups of children, the gap between policy-rhetoric and practice-reality can be lessened, as cognitively it becomes easier to understand the complexities of the special need under examination, whilst still maintaining a mainstream focus. We believe this to be especially so for children classed as having low incidence special educational needs such as visual impairment. As McCall (1999) has argued, because of their low frequency, disabilities like visual impairment 'have a tendency to be overlooked in grand designs'. Furthermore, there are specific issues relating to the nature of every specific special educational need or issues relating to type of provision already in place that require attention. In the case of the education of children with visual impairment, issues of particular relevance are:

- Visual impairment is an umbrella term for a wide variety of conditions, with the detailed practicalities for inclusion depending very much on the particular condition of a child. Specialist diagnosis and expert advise is essential to ensure that the specific visual needs of a child can be met;
- 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, 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;
- Policies and practices for educating children with visual impairment are known to vary widely across local education authorities (L.E.As);
- Visual impairment is a low incidence need, which has particular implications regarding the capacity building of mainstream class teachers and learning support assistants.

The lack of systematic research in this area required an investigation that was essentially exploratory. Our research agenda addressed the following questions:

- What are the circumstances of teaching and learning in mainstream primary schools, with respect to children with visual impairment?
What can we find out about teaching practices, e.g. to do with method, use of support teachers or teacher development, that can facilitate a greater inclusion of children with visual impairment?

How can such practices be encouraged within schools?

OBJECTIVES
The main aim of the research was to gain knowledge about teaching practices that support the inclusion of children with visual impairment in mainstream primary schools.

Our objectives were:
O1. To collect a new body of information about current practices for educating children with visual impairment in mainstream primary schools.

Transcriptions of the interview data are deposited with the ESRC Data Archive. This is a new source of data about attitudes towards inclusion and current practices regarding the inclusion of children with visual impairment in seventeen schools. All staff with a professional concern for the child with visual impairment were interviewed.

O2 To understand schools’ practice regarding teaching children with visual impairment, in terms of:

(a) teaching method
(b) the use of learning support assistants
(c) teacher development.

The objective was met via a synthesis of analysis of all forms of data comprising this inquiry. In particularly, this involved analysis of the video data, classroom observation data, interview data, inter-personal process recall and further discussions with the participants.

O3 (a) To define aspects of schools’ practice that can contribute to an inclusive teaching approach so that children with visual impairment can be more effectively supported.

This objective was met by the careful matching of specific support, school and teacher practices with our working definition of inclusive teaching in order to ascertain whether, or not, particular practices may be related with the nature of the teaching methods or teaching style in use in the classroom.

O3 (b) To consider how such teaching practices can be encouraged within school with the support of outside service organisations.
This consideration was facilitated by the previous analyses and numerous discussions with a wide range of staff. This is an interim objective that enables policy recommendations to be made with more confidence.

O4. To make policy recommendations.

Recommendations for policy were made based on the findings of this inquiry.

METHODS
This was an exploratory, qualitative inquiry in the spirit of Levi-Strauss's 'bricolage' (1966), Hammersley's and Atkinson's 'progressive focussing' (1983) and Parlett and Hamilton's (1977) Illuminative Evaluation. Hence, it is intended that the responses to the research questions are informed constructions of the research process, which is in accord with the agreed methodology. Researcher judgment, systematic data collection and analysis, and participant verification were, therefore, important aspects of the analysis.

An important part of the analytical process is to establish the face validity of the research. Whenever possible, participants were presented with the researchers’ constructions of the data during the course of the inquiry. This was achieved through discussions during consultative committee meetings, the production of interim reports and subsequent negotiation with the participants regarding their content, conversations about the teaching observations and interpersonal process recall interviews with the video footage. This dimension of participant engagement in the inquiry, allowing the validation and refinement of developing theory via their critical appraisal, facilitated the collection of data and its subsequent analysis that was grounded in the reality of the participants.

Given the strong commitment to link the research directly to the concerns of practitioners, a consultative committee comprising practitioners and academics was set up and met four times during the course of the research. This committee acted, in the first instance, to access key gate-keepers for the inquiry and then to provide project advice and later on to provide a ‘sounding board’ against which findings were verified or modified.

Six LEAs were selected on the basis that they illustrated a range of policies and practices concerning the inclusion of pupils who are visually impaired. Oldham, Trafford, Bury, Cheshire, Manchester and East Lancashire gave the desired variation in policy and circumstance, including rural-urban and more affluent- less affluent dimensions. Access to the schools was made in conjunction with the consultative committee and the service responsible for visual impairment in each LEA. Schools were selected to provide interesting and contrasting practices, contexts and needs to study (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). In particular, the schools were selected to provide access to children with a wide range of visual impairments, ages and abilities. Seventeen schools were selected from the six LEAs (originally our proposal stated eighteen schools) for site studies. The schools were selected to provide interesting and contrasting practices, contexts and needs. The site
studies enabled a broad sweep of information to be collected efficiently. Each school had at least one child with a visual impairment.

A multiple case study approach was used. In this research, schools that were studied in more depth were called case studies to distinguish them from those studied in less detail, called site-studies. In each school, interviews were conducted with all staff who had a stake in the education of the child with a visual impairment in the school. Where possible, we therefore interviewed the Head Teacher, the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), the visiting teacher (peripatetic teacher), the learning support assistant and the class teacher. The class teacher, learning support assistant and visiting teacher were also observed teaching the visually impaired child or children. The observation sessions were followed, where possible, by informal discussions with the teachers, which concentrated on their understandings and interpretations of the classroom situation (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

Twenty-three children with visual impairment participated in this study, 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 school, which was the choice of the child’s parents, made in consultation with the service and school. Thirteen schools were mainstream schools without an additional attached unit or resource base for the visually impaired. One school housed the area resource base for children with visual impairment, one school was resourced specifically for pupils with a visual impairment and two schools were resourced for children with special educational needs, for example, one had a unit for children with moderate learning difficulties.

Following the initial site-schools, five schools were selected on the basis that they provided interesting focuses for more in-depth investigation. In these five case study schools further classroom observations were conducted and all the mainstream teachers with a child with visual impairment allowed two lessons to be videoed. The visiting teachers were also observed in teaching situations. Selected video clippings were later shown to the teachers and support assistants for comment using inter-personal process recall techniques. This additional session with the teachers enabled discussion and modification of the researchers constructions of the data, further facilitating the production of data and an analysis that was grounded in the reality of the participants.

In addition, interviews were also conducted with the appropriate local education authority (LEA) officer and all participating schools were provided with an individual report and information pack.

RESULTS
As the research developed, our focus of attention increasingly was on the use learning support assistants (LSAs) and collaboration between staff concerned with the education of the child with visual impairment in the schools. Furthermore, as the inquiry progressed, themes emerged that have wider applicability for inclusive education than specifically the inclusion of children with visual impairment. In addition, the
The exploratory nature of the research allowed us to respond directly and immediately to a selection of the emerging 'findings. For instance, we found that there is great variation in the participants’ definition and understanding of the term inclusion; as a response to this we examined in detail numerous episodes of teaching in a mainstream classroom. Through analysis of the data we developed a working definition of inclusive teaching, as being when:

- The class teacher takes responsibility for the child.
- The child participates in class to the same degree or better, as the average of the other children in the class.
- The child sits so as to be part of the main activity in the lesson.
- Access to the curriculum is facilitated through the use of adapted resources and equipment.
- The learning support assistant (if there is one) works actively to facilitate the child’s independence and development; the child should not work in isolation with a learning support assistant for the majority of the time.
- There is evidence of prior planning and discussion of the lesson.

We believe that this definition will have applicability to a wider group of children than specifically those with visual impairment. Furthermore, this is an important outcome of this inquiry that was not initially anticipated, but one that emerged naturally as a consequence of the flexibility of the research design.

There are numerous examples that we could provide showing the strength of an exploratory study to gain insights into teaching practices; however, given the restrictions on the length of this report the main outcomes of the study are summarised here in relation to the various research objectives.

**Teaching Methods (O2a):** as a starting point for the preliminary analysis we considered how classroom management and teaching alters when the teacher has a visually impaired child in the class. This seems to be in three main ways. Firstly, the teacher is required to devise ways of working with additional members of staff who are responsible for the child with visual impairment, such as a visiting teacher of the visually impaired or a learning support assistant. Secondly, the teacher is required to make some accommodations to the classroom environment to enable the child to navigate around the room and have independent access to equipment, materials, wall displays etc., and may need to devise ways of working that facilitate the social inclusion of the child in the class. Thirdly, teaching materials usually require adaptation to meet the needs of the child. Of these, perhaps the most significant is the teacher’s need to adapt to work in class with a LSA and/or a visiting teacher.

In particular, we found evidence in this inquiry (based on interviews with teaching staff and direct observation) that participatory teaching methods can help meet the additional social needs of a child with visual impairment, by creating a learning environment that is supportive of children’s social development, which is especially important, given the importance of social encounters in promoting visually impaired
children's cognitive and linguistic development, as well as their development socially (e.g. Webster and Roe, 1998).

Furthermore, we can confirm that effective teaching methods in an 'inclusive' classroom involve multi-sensory access to the curriculum. Indeed, we argue that the skills associated with effective teaching, e.g. a high standard of classroom management, effective use of questioning and high quality teaching and learning materials, are especially important if children with visual impairment are to be included effectively in the lesson.

For a more detailed consideration of effective teaching methods for children with visual impairment in a mainstream primary school classroom, see Davis and Hopwood (2001).

The Use of Learning Support Assistants (O2b): there was evidence that variation in the role of the learning support assistant seemed to revolve around the extent that he or she worked exclusively with a particular 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 parallel 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 learning support assistant and rarely received direct input from the class teacher. Concern was expressed by some staff during interviews that the presence of a learning support assistant, especially if he or she is in the classroom on a full-time basis, could result in the child becoming overly dependent on the assistant and furthermore, that this 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).

In a number of schools, we observed learning support assistants who worked in partnership with the class teacher. For instance, he or she might act as a facilitator engaged in group work with a small group of children and occasionally might take on whole class teaching, whilst the class teacher works with the child with a visual impairment. When the support assistant 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 support assistant 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 learning support assistant.
We found evidence that in some schools there is a marked difference in the status, skills base and expectations of the class teachers and the learning support assistants. Based on a careful consideration of the classroom observation data and the video recordings, in this inquiry it seems that such differences in the roles can reinforce a working relationship between the learning support assistant and class teacher that does not support meaningful collaboration.

We therefore point to the need for guidance for mainstream teaching staff and appropriate and specialised training for LSAs, which echoes the findings of other researchers in the field; in particular, the recent study by Farrell, Balshaw and Polat (1999) who state that ‘For LSAs who are likely to work with a specified group of pupils with identified disabilities, e.g. pupils with visual disabilities, some proven expertise in this area may be a necessary condition of the appointment. If it is not, then appropriate training should be provided immediately the post has been filled.’ (p. 56).

Teacher Development (O2c): teacher development, usually supplied by the relevant service for the visually impaired, had taken place in all the participating schools. In many of the schools we visited, the quality of available staff development relating specifically to the needs of visually impaired children was high; however, there was inconsistency in the quality and quantity of staff development provided.

We found that in the case of children with some sight facility, the teacher is usually given advice and guidance from the support service on how best to use a pupil’s available sight. In most of the participating schools, the teacher was encouraged to provide increased access to the curriculum via non-visual means such as the hearing and touch senses. Based on the interview data it seems that a teacher can expect to be provided with detailed information about the child’s visual condition and the educational implications of this, and that the support service responsible for visual impairment should offer detailed guidance on appropriate teaching strategies, and use and adaptation of equipment and resources.

Furthermore, in order to ensure that the educational and sight needs of a child are met, it is crucial that guidance to teachers involves the translation of a full medical diagnosis into guidance on the educational needs of a child. For example, a child may need to have his or her desk raised and for it to be at a angle of 20%; alternatively, for some children, enlarging a worksheet is ineffective in helping a child with low vision to see better. Mainstream teachers and support staff need to receive accurate and on-going advice as there is a spectrum of conditions associated with visual impairment and the nature of a particular child’s condition and needs are very likely to change over time. Providing this type of advice to the school and class teacher is an important role, and many would argue, a role that requires a qualified teacher of the visual impaired.

Moreover, because visual impairment is a low incidence special educational need, many of the participating teachers had not previously taught a child with visual impairment. It can reasonably be expected that in the general population, many teachers will never have taught a child with visual impairment and that for others this
might be a one off experience, or an experience that happens every few years. It would be impractical, if not impossible, then for mainstream class teachers to acquire the same level of expertise in visual impairment as a visiting teacher or a specialist teaching assistant. However, we found that there is still very much that can be achieved by mainstream class teachers taking an active interest in facilitating the practice of specific skills. For instance, there should be many opportunities within a mainstream classroom that allow mobility skills to be developed.

Based on our observations and on analysis of the interview data it seems that the mainstream teacher, therefore, requires knowledge specific to the needs of the child in his or her class, as well as support in developing a wider repertoire of more inclusive teaching methods. Indeed, in addition to specific visual impairment related development, we identified a serious gap in opportunities for staff development in the following areas:

♦ Defining and understanding inclusive teaching.
♦ Effective use of participatory teaching methods.
♦ Effective collaboration between the class teacher and learning support assistant.
♦ Increasing the teaching repertoire of learning support assistants.

Capacity building for inclusion (O3a and O3b): as our focus moved towards the happenings in the main classroom, it became clear that developing the capacity of mainstream teachers and support staff to share expertise and to develop a larger repertoire of teaching skills that can foster the inclusion of a child with visual impairment in the class should become a central concern. We refer to this development of teaching skills as capacity building. ‘The challenge for HI and VI services is ... how to provide support which is empowering and capacity building ....’ (service head participant). We also add that the challenge is how to provide support, which is empowering and capacity building for teachers concerned with the education of children with special educational needs, without low incidence disabilities like visual impairment becoming overlooked in the grand designs.

Whilst the limitations of an exploratory study restrict the strengths of claims that can be made of the data, as a result of matching of classroom practices with ways of supporting the inclusion of a child with visual impairment data, using our working definition of inclusive teaching, it is suggested, tentatively, that the following school or classroom characteristics can facilitate the development of inclusive teaching practices for children with visual impairment:

♦ Quality staff development for all class teachers and learning support assistants.
♦ Class teachers, learning support assistants and visiting teachers having a common conception of the notion of inclusive teaching practice.
♦ A priority role of the visiting teacher to disseminate specialist knowledge to class teachers and learning support assistants.
♦ A willingness on the part of the school and class teacher to established a collaborative and empowering team-teaching relationship with the learning support assistant.
The learning support assistant viewed as belonging to both the school community and the community of the service.

- Establishing formal time for the visiting teacher, class teacher and the learning support assistant to plan and share expertise.
- Fostering positive *can do* attitudes towards inclusion and the child.
- A willingness on the part of the other children to include the child, e.g. non-visually impaired children choosing to learn Braille.
- Regular use of participatory teaching methods.

Furthermore, in our opinion, based on our experience of conducting this inquiry, there is potential for qualified teachers of the visually impaired to facilitate and provide staff development to an extent beyond the visual impairment specific training that appeared to be the case in the majority of schools we visited.

**Recommendations (O4):** based on the evidence of this inquiry, we are able to make a number of recommendations to policy makers. Firstly, the development of inclusive teaching practices within the main classroom is of paramount importance, not only for a child who is visually impaired, but also for all children in the room. The variation identified in teachers’ notions of inclusion, and subsequently of what it means to include a child, highlights the need to define and develop inclusive teaching practices in schools.

Secondly, because it is difficult for teachers to make significant changes to already long established teaching styles, it is important that teachers and learning support assistants are fully supported and encouraged to adopt methods supportive of inclusion. Measures should be put in place so that appropriate staff development is available, in addition to specific visual impairment related development in the following areas:

- Defining and understanding inclusive teaching.
- Effective use of participatory teaching methods.
- Effective collaboration between the class teacher and learning support assistant.

It is further suggested that such staff development may be enhanced by enabling the planned sharing of expertise between class teachers, support teachers and learning support assistants within a supportive environment.

In addition, we suggest that there is a role for services and particularly for qualified teachers of the visually impaired in providing and facilitating some of the areas for staff development identified above. The role of qualified teachers for the visually impaired in achieving effective inclusion for children with visual impairment should be fully recognised and supported.

**In conclusion,** the main aim of the research was to gain knowledge about teaching practices that support the inclusion of children with visual impairment in mainstream primary schools. The inquiry has, therefore, proved very successful in that
advancements in understanding have been made, especially regarding inclusive
teaching methods and our understanding of the needs of teachers and learning support
assistants as they work together towards inclusion. Our working definition of inclusive
teaching can now be used as a starting point in future research studies. Furthermore,
the substantial interview data set lodged with the ESRC Data Archive is itself an
important outcome of this study.

The exploratory nature of this inquiry enabled us to focus on the main issues and
concerns as they arose in the schools, and to respond to these in a progressive focusing
of the inquiry and the related analysis. This is undoubtedly a strength of the research as
we were able to home in on issues and questions that in our judgment emerged as
important. In this way we were able to gain knowledge necessary to identify and
conduct further research projects. For instance, by relating our checklist for inclusive
practice with characteristics of support for inclusion we are now in a position to build
on our findings by conducting further and more specifically focused research. Whilst
we consider this to have been a very successful inquiry, exploratory research has its
limitations, particularly with respect to its ability to test hypotheses, for this is not its
purpose. Every attempt has been made to steep the research in the experience of
practitioners and thus to ensure that these findings relate to the experiences of those
people on which this study was based.

IMPACTS
♦ Policy makers were involved at the LEA level as part of the research strategy
♦ The excellent relationships established whilst conducting this research have enabled
our findings to feedback directly into the practices in participating schools and
support services.
♦ Many policy-makers from LEAs and influential organisations were also addressed
at a one-day dissemination conference.
♦ An executive summary of the research findings has recently been sent to English
LEAs, Chris Wells at DfES, and Judy Sebba in the Standards and Effectiveness
Unit.

FUTURE RESEARCH PRIORITIES
Through engaging with the concerns of practitioners, we were also able to identify
other important areas requiring further research. As we have argued, enabling the
identification of more focused research questions is another strength of qualitative
exploratory research. Indeed, we identified several areas requiring additional
examination regarding the inclusion of children with visual impairment in the
mainstream.

In particular, further research is needed to:
♦ Develop further our understanding of inclusive teaching practice and how to
facilitate its development in schools, for all children, not only those who are visually
impaired.
Facilitate, monitor and evaluate initiatives designed to develop the capacity building of teachers in the mainstream by utilising expertise of specialist services for the mainstream and the special education sector.

Evaluate the provision for children with visual impairment in secondary schools.

Understand and improve the organisation and management of the process of transition that takes place as a child with visual impairment moves from primary to secondary school.

ACTIVITIES

CONFERENCES

- September 2000

- March 2001
  *Inclusive Vision Conference, University of Manchester*

Successful organisation and management of a national event.


NETWORK

Establishment of a network of interested professionals. Over one hundred people (teachers, support teachers, service managers and academics) have joined the Network for the Inclusion of Children with Visual Impairment.

PRESS RELEASES

A press release has been made and another will be announced in the near future.

OUTPUTS

PUBLICATIONS

DATA SET
Transcriptions of the interview data are deposited with the ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ. This is a new source of data relating to attitudes towards inclusion and current practices for the inclusion of children with visual impairment in seventeen schools. All staff with a professional concern for the child with visual impairment were interviewed.

REFERENCES


