

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS REGARDING EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN SPAIN

Educational services of the Spanish National Organisation of the Blind, ONCE.

Development of educational support. The ONCE and its collaboration with the Spanish education authorities.

The schooling of students with visual impairments in Spain has developed over the last few years; up until the 80s, most of the students with visual impairments were educated in specific institutions belonging to the *Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles* (ONCE). However, at present, only 4% of the students attend these specialist schools. That is, at this time, there are about 7,500 students integrated in institutions other than those of the ONCE. Almost 50% of these students are multiple and visually impaired and they are registered in special educational institutions or in special education classrooms within ordinary schools.

The ONCE offers a broad network of specialised resources aimed at dealing with visual impairment placed at the disposal of the students, regardless of the type of schooling in which they are registered. This network is meant to complement the services offered by the public school system, and it is a part of the network of general resources agreed with the Government through agreements, contracts and special arrangements.

The main goal is to attain a higher quality of education for people with visual impairments and to guarantee their integration within the framework of inclusive education.

The ONCE's Educational Resources Centers

The ONCE has developed its own Model for providing Social Services to visually impaired persons, providing and organising the educational intervention needed by blind and visually impaired students.

The Educational Resources Centers, with their specialised educational services, which are meant to complement the resources of the regular educational system, endeavour to meet the special educational needs resulting from a visual disability. In order to do so, the necessary coordination must be established with the educational services, regional governments and other institutions, in order to complement the work being carried out in the schools, assist the families and professionals, and promote and encourage educational experiences which will enable the students to benefit from ordinary and inclusive settings.

In these Educational Resources Centers (located in Alicante, Barcelona, Madrid, Pontevedra and Seville), the necessary human and material resources can be found for the support and educational attention needed by this group of students. These Centers act as reference Centers for their urban and rural areas of intervention.

The Specific Centers of the ONCE

First, the educational needs of a student and the goals to be achieved are determined and duly evaluated. Then, the Specific Support Team may refer the student to one of ONCE's schools, whenever these same goals cannot be achieved with the resources available in his or her area of residence, or would involve a serious risk of scholastic failure, or the family conditions make it advisable.

Specific Support Teams for the Educational Attention to be provided to Individuals with Visual impairments

The Specific Teams for the Educational Attention to individuals with visual impairments are dependent upon the Educational Resources Centers within a basically provincial geographic area. In all the Spanish administrative provinces, collaboration agreements exist between the ONCE and each Educational Administration or

Department, regulating the functioning of these Specific Teams.

These Teams pay special attention to all those individuals with a visual acuity of less than 1/10 or a reduction in their visual field of 90%. As an exception, in accordance with the educational needs which each student presents, those students with a visual acuity of more than what has been previously established by the regulations will be attended to, as long as it does not exceed 3/10.

Within the framework of the ONCE's Model for Providing Social Services, steps will be taken with the students as a result of the formulation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (in terms of the student's specific needs), which will be defined by the user and his or her family.

The main goal of the intervention on the part of the Specific Team is to achieve the effective integration, inclusion and normalisation of students with visual impairments in all the areas of their lives, for which specialised technical advice will be provided, aimed at all the agents of the educational community.

(PHOTO 1 Educacion 2-14A-47)

The attention to be provided will begin with the social worker getting to know the student and his family, so that an initial evaluation can be made of the student's needs in terms of his age, his visual impairment, his curricular competency, the characteristics of his surroundings, etc.

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is thus established: a decision is made as to what type and frequency of direct support and attention will be required by the student, in his school, and from the teacher or tutor of the Team. This support teacher or tutor will be a specialist in visual impairment and will work directly with the student on aspects specifically related to his visual impairment, in order to assure that he is in an ideal position to take full advantage of his school programme (we are talking about techniques in independence, orientation and mobility, daily living activities, cane techniques and skills, use of optical aids, etc.). This attention is not meant to replace, in any way, the classroom teacher, but is meant to complement him/her. We will furnish the necessary resources so that the visually impaired student can be fully integrated in the classroom and can keep up with the regular rhythm and dynamics of the class. Thus, for example, classroom textbooks, notes and examinations will be provided in Braille or other tactile formats. The specific techniques for teaching individuals with visual impairments will be explained to the tutor, together with the usefulness of the materials and the way to use them and any other additional explanations which might be necessary: the need to make more frequent and specific verbal statements, the importance of maintaining order in the classroom, the importance of avoiding the tendency to overprotect the student, etc.

When dealing with a child with visual difficulties we may tend to think more about what they are not capable of doing than what they can. Education must begin by considering their potential, while respecting the specific nature of their blindness. It is a matter of giving an individualised response to the educational needs which we all have.

Members of the Specific Team

Teams are made up of several professionals who work in a coordinated manner in order to achieve the very best results. The members are:

A support teacher or tutor, as the closest reference to the students, their families and the educational institutions where the students attend school. They will guarantee with their periodic interventions in the institution, the integral attention of each student within the educational context.

A social worker, who will be responsible for the interventions required in regard to society and the family.

A psychologist - educator: who will provide suitable counselling as to how the visual disability affects the

motor, social, affective and cognitive development of the students.

A technical expert on rehabilitation or an expert responsible for the learning processes directed at achieving a greater personal autonomy.

A technical instructor trained in the use of aids and techniques for individuals with visual impairments, who will guarantee the necessary learning processes in regard to the new technologies, which will make the processes of functional learning and access to information possible.

A social-cultural counsellor, who will encourage individual or group interventions which would facilitate access, use and the enjoyment of the leisure time and extra-curricular activities.

There are different areas of intervention:

a) Interventions with the Student:

The main goal is to furnish the student with the attention he requires, through specialised intervention in the specific areas related to visual impairment, so that he can acquire independence and responsibility in his work, by encouraging appropriate work and study habits.

To facilitate the **maturity and development** of the student and have the child acquire suitable skills, capabilities, and physical and intellectual abilities.

To reinforce the effectiveness of the child's **visual functioning**, by means of the application of specialised techniques and instruments, individualised programmes for visual stimulation, and through training in the use of optical aids (magnifying glasses, CCTVs, etc.)

Development of **personal independence**: orientation and mobility, skills for daily life, that is, everything related to movement and getting around in interior and exterior areas with autonomy, efficiency and safety, and activities pertaining to eating, dressing, cleanliness, use of specific materials, etc. It is absolutely necessary for the student to become integrated and to normalise his every day life in all the different areas. The responsibility falls on the family, although, on occasions a tendency towards overprotection, a lack of time or a lack of personal resources may prove to be an obstacle for the child to develop this autonomy.

Basic instrumental techniques (reading, writing and calculating), whether it be in Braille or in ink, in terms of the student's characteristics and according to the nature of his visual disability and prognosis. It is important for the student to have a useful reading and writing code.

(PHOTO 2 Educacion 1-18-13)

It is also necessary to specifically reinforce certain curricular areas, such as the plastic arts, mathematics, music, physical education and technology, due to their particular complexity in the adaptation or use of special materials, their didactics and their methodology.

Social habits: To contribute to the improvement of self esteem, by collaborating in the application of special programmes for maturity and socialisation, and intervening in those cases in which it may be necessary. All of this would be aimed at obtaining a better autonomy and personal confidence for the child in the school, family and social settings. In addition, working on the **leisure activities, spare time and sports**, are also fundamental elements which will influence the student's inclusion. It is necessary, at times, to work on playing and on games, for example, during classroom breaks, to teach the child with visual impairment and their companions who can see without difficulty, strategies and models for group participation.

(PHOTO 3 Educacion 23)

It would be wise to suggest activities for leisure time which would be organised in the surroundings and encourage their participation. It is also advisable to encourage the integral development of the student within his closest social context through joint experiences and encounters, and reinforce his relationships with his classmates and with other children with visual impairment, in view of the need to have several different reference groups.

New technologies: At this time it is highly important, given the boom in the information and communications technologies, to furnish technical support, advice and orientation to the students and to the professionals in the schools, in relation to the different technical aids and the adaptation of tools for accessing the information for people with visual impairments. It is, therefore, necessary for the different educational platforms to be made accessible to individuals with total blindness or partial sight.

Personal, educational and vocational orientation: Evaluation and intervention of the educational needs of the students in regard to their study habits and techniques is also important, adapting them to their visual impairment. Also guidance and orientation should be provided as to possible vocations and the preparation of students for their insertion in the working world.

a) Interventions with the Educational Institution

In general, the introduction of a student with a visual impairment into an ordinary classroom should not entail any great difficulties. The student will require specific attention and a series of necessary human resources and materials so that he can be integrated into the classroom and follow the school dynamics. The Specific Team, then, should inform, advise and support the educational institutions into which the students are integrated. It is necessary, first of all, to make the educational community aware of the need for the student's integration and inform them of his characteristics and needs. Information should also be provided as to the necessary support.

By means of this advisory process, information will be provided as to the adaptations of the study area which the student will need, as well as the selection of the reading and writing code (Braille or ink) most appropriate or the location of the student in the classroom, in terms of his specific needs.

In addition, the material the student requires will be adapted in the classroom and the school teachers will be advised as to the elaboration and use of these specific materials and the determination of his needs. The specific teaching techniques for individuals with visual impairment and their unique learning characteristics will be explained. The classroom teacher should be familiar with the resources available and the use of the didactic material, from the rubber laminas used to obtain on the spot relief drawings to the more sophisticated apparatus for accessing information.

The Team should make the entire staff of teachers aware of the fact that by making use of the necessary adaptations, it will be possible to respond to the student's needs.

It is also important to work in a coordinated manner with the guidance staff and with the Specific Teams in order to make the appropriate evaluations and decide jointly on the areas of intervention required within the school sphere and to determine the educational institution which best meets the needs of the students. Furthermore, there should be the necessary collaboration in all the educational and orientation activities.

The school should be given sufficient information in order to facilitate the process of admitting the students, by providing advice as to their specific needs and the educational implications, and the type of intervention which will be provided and by helping to eliminate any barriers which can make their integration more difficult.

The Specific Teams will attend to students at all of the educational stages: from Pre-School up to the University. It is important to highlight the importance of providing early attention to infants with visual impairment, as a way to prevent any disruptions in their development in any sense.

c) Interventions with the Family:

The families are the true agents in the integrating process of their children, and so it is necessary to provide special orientation and advice in order to encourage the process of accepting their child's visual disability.

It is a matter of giving the family, which has the main responsibility for their child's education, information relating to the disability and to the assistance available in order to reinforce the personal resources needed for raising their child, because his or her integration depends upon it.

Information is also provided on the most significant aspects in the child's development: the stage of development, the existing resources, technical aids and all those specific aspects of the visual disability which must be encouraged: the process of socialisation, independence, acquiring of a positive self esteem, acceptance of the disability, visual stimulation, etc. It is also necessary to reinforce the family's relationship with the school. In addition, information will be provided on scholarships and financial assistance from the ONCE and other resources outside of this Agency.

It is a matter, then, of providing the parents with a place where they can express their doubts, problems and fears and where they can receive the emotional support necessary. In order to do so, the Specific Team must organise special areas for attending to the families and programme specific activities for them: schools for parents, learning workshops, etc. and encourage the participation of these families in other forums.

d) Interventions in the Social Environment:

Social relationships are a key factor in the creation of the individual's identity, and so the actions taken in this sphere will be of central importance.

(PHOTO 4 Educacion 4-6A-33)

The way the student adapts, interacts and adjusts can reveal certain maladaptive behaviour due to a lack of visual learning of the appropriate behaviours. Therefore, in view of the importance of interaction for personal identity and social inclusion, it is absolutely necessary to work on these aspects, and even train the youngest children in the basic social skills and habits, which cannot be learned through imitation and which would facilitate their relationships with other people and with society in general.

In order to facilitate a normalised growth and development in these aspects, the student must have several reference groups. In fact, it would be a good idea to organise group activities in which other individuals with visual impairment would participate, which would allow the student to create bonds, identify himself with others...

Furthermore, it is necessary to support the tutor and all the professionals involved and make them aware of the importance of encouraging and facilitating social relationships.

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