

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

SUBMISSION FROM SOUTH PACIFIC EDUCATORS IN VISION IMPAIRMENT (SPEVI)

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INTRODUCTION

THE ASSOCIATION

South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI) was established in 1955 as an association for teachers of the vision impaired, under the name of **Australian and New Zealand Association of Educators of the Visually Handicapped (ANZAEVH)**. It has since broadened its membership beyond teachers alone, to anyone directly involved with the education of persons with vision impairment.

The aims of the association are:

- To act as the professional body in matters pertaining to the education of people with a vision impairment within the South Pacific region.
- To stimulate research and encourage the raising of educational standards.
- To promote and encourage the training of educators in vision impairment.
- To evaluate and encourage the use of appropriate, up to date materials, including technical equipment, in the education of persons with vision impairment, and to facilitate in depth teacher education programs in the use of new techniques and technology.
- To promote and encourage the interchange of information from both within our organisation and with ones of a similar interest.
- To promote and encourage the utilization of services and materials and the sharing of professional literature, opinion, and experiences.
- To use all available resources to further the objectives of the Association.

PARAMETERS OF THE SUBMISSION

The issues addressed in this submission reflect feedback from members. The group of students who are discussed in this submission are those who are blind or have low vision. Some of these students may have additional or multiple disabilities. Recognition must be given to the fact that early intervention, primary schooling and secondary education are managed by individual states and therefore the services and programs for blind and vision impaired children vary considerably from state to state. This submission only touches on these differences but we would be happy to expand on the differences between states in our verbal presentation to the Inquiry.

The situation of tertiary students, particularly in relation to timely and economically viable access to study materials in alternate formats, is an enormous issue in its own right and will be addressed through the submissions of other peak organizations such as **Blind Citizens Australia** and the **Australian Braille Authority**.

This submission will only briefly outline some of the many complex issues related to the education of those who are blind or who have low vision but we would very much appreciate the opportunity to expand upon them in our verbal presentation to you.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

THE CRITERIA USED TO DEFINE DISABILITY AND TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN LEVELS OF HANDICAP

The World Health Organization defines blindness as “corrected visual acuity in the better eye of less than 3/60” (Gilbert and Foster, 2001, p. 1) and severe vision impairment as “corrected acuity in the better eye of less than 6/60” (Gilbert & Foster, 2001. p. 2). As a person’s level of vision can be measured in a reasonably objective manner and a level indicating the amount of loss in terms of acuity or field can be assigned, the definition of vision impairment is not a significant issue for our members. Although there are slight variations from State to State in terms of which students receive support, professionals working in the field generally agree on what constitutes a vision impairment. The early and accurate diagnosis of vision impairment is a continual concern for members. This will be addressed further in the section on Early Intervention.

Despite being able to identify our clientele, there appear to be few, if any, recent, comprehensive and consistent Australian prevalence data on students who are blind or vision impaired as a group. Overseas demographic data affirm that professionals increasingly have to address the needs of individuals who have low vision. The NSW Department of Education and Training for example, has suggested that the ratio of school students who have low vision as opposed to those who are blind in NSW is 4:1. The Department has identified these students with low vision as being at high risk of failure in literacy and numeracy. Similar data needs to be gathered nationally so that appropriate action plans can be developed in many areas, particularly that of achievement in literacy and numeracy.

One of the major issues facing several States across the Nation, is a current trend to treat disability as an overarching generic condition and to minimise disability specific services. This current policy trend away from the recognition of individual disability-specific needs for the purposes of simplified program design, administration resource allocation and funding, constitutes a major weakness in

some inclusive models and places students who are blind or have low vision at significant levels of educational risk.

THE ACCURACY WITH WHICH STUDENTS' DISABILITY RELATED NEEDS ARE BEING ASSESSED

Literacy and Numeracy

There is little Australian research relating to the literacy and numeracy acquisition of students who are blind or have low vision. There is a need to coordinate planning at the national level for literacy and numeracy programs and to initiate research into the efficacy of the plans as existing programs are modified or new programs implemented.

There has been significant focus nationally on literacy and numeracy over the past few years. In 1997, the Ministerial Council on Employment Education and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) outlined a national goal involving being able to read, write, spell and be numerate at an appropriate level upon leaving primary school (Verick, 2001). This goal was further elaborated upon in 2001, with an expectation outlined by a Commonwealth Minister that students should be expected to be reading and writing successfully by the end of Year 3 or within the first four years of school (Verick, 2001).

Where do our students who have low vision and particularly those who are blind, stand in relation to such goals? Despite frequent lobbying by the **Australian Blindness Forum (ABF)** over recent years, it took until the end of 2000 for the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) to provide funding for a project to investigate acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills by students who are blind or vision impaired. Several members of **SPEVI** were part of the project team and steering committee. The report has still not been released. Whilst students who are blind or have low vision may participate in State testing programs, data on the performance of this group of students is not readily available in each state. In Queensland last year, for example, when asked about the availability of materials in alternative formats for the Year 3

Equating Study, teachers were told just to leave out the vision impaired students as materials in alternate formats were not available. This discriminatory practice by a quasi government agency is not acceptable. Hence the need for the Commonwealth Government to consider initiating a formal, regular investigations into the literacy and numeracy abilities of students who are blind or have low vision is imperative.

Further, education of students who are blind or who have low vision should be recognised as an integral part of any national planning in terms of literacy and numeracy from the initial planning and development stages, not merely as an after thought after the material is developed.

It must also be stressed in this section that the advent of technology most certainly does not replace the need for students who are blind or who have severe low vision to read and write Braille. Without Braille, these students are illiterate. Access to teachers trained in vision impairment, who can read and write Braille efficiently, is critical for students who require the use of this literacy medium.

One of the major barriers to literacy and numeracy acquisition faced by both students who are vision impaired and their teachers, is related to the need for additional time. Extra time is needed by students with restricted vision to participate adequately in almost every area of the school curriculum. Because students who are blind or who have low vision are often severely disadvantaged by the highly visual nature of much of their class work, their overall work speed is substantially reduced. When compared with their sighted peers, many students with vision impairment generally require more concentration and energy and take longer to complete daily activities. Thus, fatigue is a real issue for these students for whom the education system expects them to learn at the same rate as sighted peers.

Expanded Core Curriculum

80% of what the brain receives comes to it through vision. In order to compensate for this loss or defect in the information to the brain, our students require direct and specific instructions in all areas of

the curriculum and also in areas that may be considered to be in addition to the regular school curriculum. We refer to such skills as being part of the **Expanded Core Curriculum** and include instruction in:

- Braille reading and writing
- Braille mathematics
- Braille music
- Orientation and Mobility
- Daily Living Skills
- Use of technology
- Social skills
- Visual Efficiency Training
- Listening skills
- Concept development.

As it is a constant battle for educators to balance elements of the Expanded Core Curriculum, so vital to our students, with the demands of a very full classroom curriculum, formal recognition on a National level needs to be given to the Expanded Core Curriculum. It is recommended that a national consultative group be commissioned to develop benchmarks for the appropriate delivery of the expanded core curriculum to students who are blind or vision impaired, with emphasis on literacy and numeracy acquisition and that these benchmarks be consistent with current legislation and education policies.

Further, extensive work in this area has already been carried out in the USA and more recently in New Zealand, so that the development of a National Expanded Core Curriculum document is an achievable goal if appropriate support and funding is dedicated to this achievement.

THE PARTICULAR NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FROM LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC, NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING AND INDIGENOUS BACKGROUNDS AND FROM RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

The quality of educational service provision to students with significant vision impairments may be reduced or limited by existing service provision models when those students are geographically isolated or live in rural communities. Providing trained teachers of the vision impaired on a regular basis and the appropriate level of technology and resourcing is a significant challenge for many education authorities across the country. It is important that these students receive the same curricula as that received by their sighted peers, and in addition, be afforded access to all areas of the expanded core curriculum. This is also the case when students live in some socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, when they belong to indigenous peoples and non-English speaking ethnic groups, or experience poverty and abuse. The difficulty of obtaining Braille material in their first language or even finding transcribers who can produce Braille in the required foreign language is a problem even for English speaking students undertaking LOTE in schools

Similarly, access to early intervention services, which are readily available in capital cities are often not available to families living in rural and remote localities.

THE EFFECTIVENESS AND AVAILABILITY OF EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Insufficient emphasis is placed upon the critically important role of early intervention and early childhood education. Early intervention should be initiated at the time of diagnosis of the disability (which may be as young as a few weeks old) and the early childhood sector should gain major status amongst public education authorities and not be the sole domain of private and charitable agencies, as it is in some states. Government Education Departments should work collaboratively with a variety of public and private agencies and parents so that positive early education experiences are provided from the time of the child's birth.

It is critical that children who are blind or who have low vision are exposed to a range of early experiences, such as:

- Early concept development
- Active learning
- Social skills
- Orientation and Mobility
- Pre-Braille skills
- Physiotherapy
- Occupational therapy
- Speech language therapy
- Daily living skills and
- School readiness skills.

In addition, it is imperative that parents and siblings of the child with a vision impairment can obtain appropriate and regular counselling and support at this early stage. Establishing networks with other parents and families and accessing successful role models are also of great value in the early stages. These are currently available on an ad hoc basis and only in major cities.

ACCESS TO AND ADEQUACY OF FUNDING AND SUPPORT IN BOTH THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

The situation across States and Territories varies markedly in terms of the support offered to students who are blind or who have low vision by the Public and Private sectors. In Queensland for example, all specialist services in vision impairment are provided to students by Education Queensland, whether the students attend Public or Private schools. In New South Wales and Victoria, a significant amount of service to vision impaired students is provided through the Private sector. Although funding arrangements and support mechanisms vary greatly, the overall levels of support given to students are still far from sufficient. Further, inconsistencies also exist within states, and the support received by students may depend on where they live, which school they attend and which agency provides their support.

Funding is a critical issue in both the private and public sectors. In both sectors parents feel that they have to provide more and more funding and support themselves and often they are not in a position to do this. Across the country and across sectors, education of those who are blind or have low vision is largely dependent on the charity dollar. Some of the major areas in the education of those who are vision impaired that require significant injections of funding include:

- Access to trained staff
- Training of skilled staff
- Production of materials in alternative formats
- Provision of appropriate technology (including repair, maintenance and upgrades) and training in its use.

THE NATURE, EXTENT AND FUNDING OF PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE FOR FULL OR PARTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES WITH MAINSTREAM STUDENTS

Across the country an array of educational service provision models exist for students who are vision impaired. These include: Visiting Teacher support; Special Education Unit Support; Special Schools and, reverse integration models. This full array of support services for students should be maintained. Despite this array, most students who are vision impaired but who do not have additional or multiple disabilities are educated in mainstream settings. This in itself raises an array of complex issues.

Braille Literacy and Numeracy was mentioned earlier in this submission and is a critical issue. Our students are at significant educational risk due to inadequate funding for specialist support staff, technology and the production of materials in alternative formats (eg. Braille, large print, audio). Students who are blind or who have low vision need specialist instruction from trained teachers of the vision impaired in literacy and numeracy. Without this their levels of literacy and numeracy will not be adequate for survival in life so is not acceptable.

Information, even at Preschool level is becoming more visual and State testing programs are placing an increased emphasis on **viewing**. In regular settings, there is a heavy reliance on pictures and diagrams. This makes the task of presenting class materials to vision impaired students even more complex. Students must be specifically taught how to scan, interpret and respond to tactile graphics. Tactile graphics instruction should be introduced at an early age, along with instruction in literacy and numeracy. There is a need for research into tactile graphics acquisition and the development of teaching materials and a set of Guidelines for the production of tactile graphics. Specific funding needs to be allocated to this area.

TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At the **Heads of Educational Services: Vision Impairment (HOES)** meeting held in Sydney in late 2001, staffing and personnel issues were seen as the most critical issue in the education of students who are blind and who have low vision in this country at the present time.

Specialist teacher training in Vision Impairment is only available in Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. The Pre-service course in Queensland for example, only runs every second year. There are very limited opportunities to study in the area of dual sensory impairment (deaf-blind).

Within States and educational districts, transfer and human resourcing policies often prevent trained teachers of the vision impaired from being placed in supporting roles and available for specialist roles, even when no other trained personnel can be found to fill those rolls. There is a nation wide shortage of teachers trained in vision impairment.

In many States the mean age of trained teachers of the vision impaired is increasing and few younger teachers are being trained or attracted to the area of vision impairment to replace them.

Pre-service teachers undertaking regular education courses should be expected to take at least one mandatory subject in special education, within which a major component teaches about vision impairment, with a particular focus on the unique needs of these students in terms of literacy and numeracy.

Many educational sectors are trying to replace trained teachers of the vision impaired with Teacher Aides for economic and human resourcing needs. Whilst Teacher Aides are a valuable and necessary part of educational support, they are not trained teachers and should not be used as such. They lack the underlying knowledge to develop appropriate strategies and techniques to ensure successful integration and learning.

Due to the importance of teaching Braille to students, minimum standards in Braille proficiency for teachers should be developed. Further, more transcribers and Teacher Aides should be encouraged to undertake the Braille Proficiency Exam run by the **ABA**.

It is highly likely that the **Unified English Braille Code (UEBC)** will be introduced in Australia in the second half of 2004 or soon after. It is recommended that government funds the implementation costs of adopting the UEBC, considering the long-term benefits that will flow to a significant number of disadvantaged consumers.

Increased funding from employers needs to be made available for educators of the vision impaired to access professional development such as: conferences; membership of professional associations; courses; networking; journal subscriptions and post graduate study. As this is a low incidence disability area, opportunities do not always exist locally and so travel costs are necessary. The critical nature of this professional development and the associated funding support needs to be given priority and endorsement at Government level.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS AND RESOURCE DEMANDS OF COMMONWEALTH AND STATE AND TERRITORY LEGISLATION

As production of materials in alternative formats is such a critical issue across all education sectors, and is a time consuming and costly activity, strategies need to be put in place to minimise both time in production and cost. Educational authorities, production agencies, publishers and advocates, which are major stakeholders in policy and program development, should familiarise themselves with recent moves towards the passage of the **Instructional Materials Accessibility Act of 2001** in America. These agencies should consider the feasibility, in Australia, of implementing similar national legislation, including the establishment of a national electronic repository of published documents that are typically used as text or reference materials in Australian schools. An endeavour such as this should be endorsed and receive seeding funding at Commonwealth Government level.

As the orientation to surroundings, safe mobility and independence of students who are vision impaired is largely taught through instruction in Orientation and Mobility, minimum standards for teachers of the vision impaired and for Orientation and Mobility teachers / Instructors should be endorsed and established through the convening of a National Working Party, which will include access to legal advice.

National **Guidelines for the Description of Visual Information** and **Guidelines for the Production of Tactile Graphics** need to be developed. Funding should be made available to the **Round Table on Information Access for People with a Print Disability** to employ a Project Officer on behalf of the **Australian Braille Authority** to steer each of these important projects.

THE PROPER ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE STATES AND TERRITORIES IN SUPPORTING THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

SPEVI, through its **Heads of Educational Services (HOES)** group, has spent several years developing *Principles and Standards for the Education of Children and Youth with Vision Impairments, including those with Multiple Disabilities*. This document has been given to Margaret Verick, Policy Officer (Blindness and Vision Impairment) who is employed by **ACROD** on behalf of the **Australian Blindness Forum (ABF)**. It is hoped that endorsement of this document will be gained. Government adoption is then required to support and enact the principles and standards outlined in the document.

As mentioned earlier, the **Expanded Core Curriculum** is of great importance to students who are vision impaired. A National Working Party needs to be established to write the document. National accreditation then needs to be given, so that its use throughout Australian schools can be ratified.

CONCLUSION

The overarching emphasis of this submission is that there is presently no National Agenda on Vision Impairment and no strong federal coordination. Positive change in this area needs to occur so that positive outcomes can be guaranteed for all students who are blind or have low vision across the country.

At our verbal presentation, we would be happy to elaborate on any of the points mentioned in this submission and to provide any relevant documentation which you may wish to view.

REFERENCES

Gilbert, C. & Foster, A. (2001). *Childhood Blindness in the Context of 2020: The Right to Sight*. World Health Organization.

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