

The Role and Function of the Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments

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Infants, children, and youth with visual impairments receive special education and related services in a variety of settings that bring them into contact with a range of personnel. A critical member of this team of professionals is the teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI), whose specialized training and experience establish him or her as the individual best qualified to address the unique learning needs created by a visual impairment. Because legislation mandates highly qualified general and special education teachers, however, there is often confusion about the role, functions, and responsibilities of the TSVI.

The TSVI is a special educator trained and certified to provide direct instruction, accommodations, and modifications that provide access to the general curriculum for children who are blind or visually impaired. TSVIs are employed in the full continuum of placement options, serving as part of the team providing free appropriate public education to infants, children, and youth with visual impairments in local education agencies, regional collaboratives, and specialized schools. Their role varies from teacher-consultant, to specialized skills instructor, to classroom teacher. TSVIs work with a wide range of students with a wide range of abilities (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004; Spungin, 1984; Spungin & Taylor, 1986; Suvak, 2004; Wolffe et al., 2002). They teach the alternative skills that facilitate access to general education, and they teach the expanded core curriculum that supports students in and allows them to benefit from the general curriculum (Hatlen, 1996; 2003). In some cases, the TSVI is the primary educator working with the infant, child, or youth with a visual impairment, while at other times the TSVI acts as a consultant to those providing instruction. The roles and responsibilities of the TSVI are unique and varied and require a broad base of professional knowledge and the ability to respond with flexibility to changing conditions and student needs (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004).

Parents and educators overwhelmingly report that administrators are not well-informed about appropriate services for students with low-incidence disabilities (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004; Ferrell & Correa, 2004; Rude et al., 2005). Where students with visual impairment are concerned, administrators often must be reminded that:

- The primary issue when educating students with visual impairments is access to the visual environment and opportunities to learn. Quite simply, students with

- i. Physical facilities, including design and selection of classroom environments and office space, as well as adequate storage space for instructional materials and equipment.
 - j. Student scheduling, including preparation of a master schedule to be given to the supervisor and principal(s) of the building(s) in which students are served.
 - k. Equipment needs, particularly in the area of technology, but also including materials and learning devices.
2. *Supervision of Paraeducators.* Many schools employ paraeducators to supplement the instruction provided by TSVIs (Forster & Holbrook, 2005). These individuals carry out a variety of roles, as braille transcriber, materials adapter, and sometimes academic tutor. Because these individuals have not received formal training, they may not understand how low vision or blindness affects teaching and learning. It is essential that the TSVI supervise paraeducators assigned to students with visual impairments, particularly in braille reading and writing, mathematics, other academic content areas, the expanded core curriculum, and in promoting independence and age-appropriate relationships whenever possible,
3. *Record Keeping.* Teachers indicate that paperwork consumes too much valuable instructional time and thus decreases their effectiveness with students (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004). Nevertheless, TSVIs must:
 - a. Maintain records of student assessments, IEPs, IFSPs, ITPs, other planning documents, periodic reviews, progress reports, and signed parental release forms.
 - b. Coordinate ordering of textbooks among classroom teachers and instructional materials centers.
 - c. Assure that district and statewide standardized tests and supplementary materials are made available to each student with appropriate accommodations, as identified in the IEP.
 - d. Maintain a materials and equipment inventory.
 - e. Exchange information about students with visual impairments with appropriate personnel following school district or agency policies regarding confidentiality.
 - f. Maintain program-wide student census information for purposes of annual count and eligibility for federal quota funds through the American Printing House for the Blind.
 - g. Act as case manager, when and if appropriate.
4. *Case Finding and Student Referral Procedures.* TSVIs' responsibilities also include services to the school at large, including: