Best practice in supporting students with vision impairment

Dual model of learning: access to learning – learning to access

Vision impairment education focuses upon two areas of targeted educational outcomes and associated interventions:

1. Ensuring children and young people have fair and optimised access to the school curriculum.
2. Ensuring children and young people have opportunities to develop their independence and social inclusion.

The first area is concerned with equal access to education. The second area is partly linked to maximising a child or young person's ability to develop as an independent learner within educational contexts, but is also part of a broader agenda about empowering learners for adult life, independent living and employment. This aligns with the principles of the SEND Code of Practice and preparing for adulthood from the earliest years.

Supporting students with vision impairment in school

Best practice principles for supporting students with vision impairment in schools can be divided into five themes:

1. Collaborative working with other practitioners
2. Getting to know the child as an individual learner
3. Inclusive environment adjustments (access to learning)
4. Inclusive classroom practice (access to learning)
5. Facilitating independence (learning to access)

Theme 1: Collaborative working with other practitioners

- Be sure to work with practitioners with expertise in VI and/or SEND for advice and support – this includes the QTVI, Habilitation Specialist and SENCO
- Use these practitioners as a resource for guidance to help you develop your own expertise – eg, request training for yourself or support staff to act as a sight guide, for producing accessible resources, for using non-visual teaching strategies or learn about access technology and touch typing skills that the student might use.
- Your conversation with the specialist practitioners could include a discussion about time requirements for exams/assessment and how this can be applied to practice assessments.
- Find out from the QTVI about specialist equipment the school may want to provide to facilitate inclusion eg, for PE and science practical activities.
- Plan with the QTVI how specialist teaching will fit alongside mainstream teaching eg, when the pupil is learning braille and phonics or learning specialist braille codes for maths, science and modern foreign languages.

Theme 2: Getting to know the child as an individual learner

- Find out from the child about his or her eye condition, what they can or can't see, and how their vision impairment influences their learning. It is important not to make assumptions and it is also great practice for the child. Observe how accurate they are when copying from the board or resources, or if they copy from their neighbour's notes. Watch out for errors in maths such as getting '+' and '÷' mixed up. Observe if they can read back their own writing.
- As part of your conversation with a child, rather than focusing on what they are not able to do explore what helps with his or her learning in particular subjects or contexts. You can then draw on these strategies in your teaching and ask the child for feedback to ensure they are helping.
- Your conversation with the child can also include a discussion about the adjustments that they might need for exams or assessments, and about the access technology they are using.
- Be aware that the way in which the child learns or the adjustments that they need may change over time. This could be, for example, because the child has a fluctuating eye condition (in which case these changes might be rapid), or it could be because they are learning new access skills and want to apply them to their learning.

Theme 3: Inclusive environment adjustments (access to learning)

- Through discussion with the specialist practitioners think about the various inclusive adjustments that can be made to the class and school environment. These include:
  - Promoting clutter free spaces (corridors, cloak rooms etc)
  - Use of tactile coat pegs
  - High contrast/tactile signage
  - Clearly labelled markers for top and bottom of stairs
  - Tactile floors
  - Lighting- particularly in dark areas of the school
- Lunch and break times can be particularly challenging events – think about ways in which barriers to participation can be reduced eg, familiarise child with seating arrangements at lunchtime, organised peer support/buddy, familiarising child with routes to and from other areas in the school, ensuring other adults and peers have sighted guide skills to support child as appropriate.

Theme 4: Inclusive classroom practice (access to learning)

- Inclusive classroom practice includes a focus on ensuring that all children in the class benefit. To ensure children with vision impairment are suitably included consider the following:
  - Following guidance from the QTVI, ensure that the child has access to learning material in a format that they are able to access, and ensure that this is available from the start of the lesson.
  - Following guidance from the QTVI, adapt learning tasks so that they are accessible eg, adapted games or rules in PE, offering the option of 3D art activities.
  - Exercise clarity in use of language when giving instructions (eg, rather than saying 'the cupboard over here you might say 'the cupboard next to my desk at the front of the classroom'
- Use the child's name first where possible so he or she knows who you are addressing (eg, rather than saying 'Can the three children on that table stand up please' you might say 'Can Nicky, Rajinda, and Steve stand up please'). Similarly if you ask for a show of hands to a question say the name of the child you are asking to respond (eg, Rajinda, you have your hand up, what do you think the answer is?'
- Consider how inclusive the classroom learning environment is to a child with vision impairment. For example, does the lighting need to be adjusted, is there a lot of clutter, could the tables to be rearranged in a better way, are you using pens on the whiteboard which maximise contrast.

- Be creative and use multisensory teaching approaches so there is not an overreliance on learning through visual means. This might include the use of real life objects/models for the class to feel rather than just looking at pictures/images.
- Consider using organised peer support – this might be a playtime buddy who can support the child in making his or her way to and from class at break times, or group work in the classroom such as paired whiteboard activities and the sharing out of individual tasks in a group science experiment.

Theme 5: Facilitating Independence (learning to access)
- Don't feel a need to do everything for the child and wherever possible help him or her to develop their independence.
- This includes supporting/encouraging the child to use any assistive tools that she or he might have to enable independence, such as a cane, low vision aid, tablet computer, or laptop
- Support the child with the development of independent access skills, as guided by the QTVI, wherever possible. This may include, for example the use of assistive technology so the child does not rely on others to provide access to materials (eg, through large print copies) or encouragement of touch typing skills.
- Promote opportunities for self-advocacy so the child develops confidence in speaking about his or her visual condition and support needs. This will help them prepare for when they are older when this is expected of them.
- Be aware that using non-sighted methods for accessing tasks can take additional time so be prepared to accept a lower quantity (not quality!) of work done independently over more work done with significant input from support staff. Focus in on the skill being taught or assessed so the pupil can put their energies into this rather than spend time on extraneous tasks.

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