Preparing Future Graduates

who happen to be blind

Children entering Prep in 2013 will graduate at the end of 2025. If you think that's a long time off, you're right. We are preparing children for a world we don't really know.

The best we can do is to develop individuals who are independent, literate, numerate, technologically savvy, and adaptable and able to participate fully in what the 21st Century has to offer.

"Tricks of the trade" when working with a blind student.

The goal for all blind children is to become competent, self-sufficient, independent persons who can **participate** in all facets of life.

As the class teacher you are the key person in the blind child's understanding of him/herself and their acquisition of skills.

The aim of education should be to develop INDEPENDENCE.

This is even more critical for a blind child. This means independence in all facets of their life:

Academic
Orientation and Mobility
Recreational
Inter-personal
Self advocacy
Daily living

How blind children get to be independent is based on skills. The skill that underpins all achievement is ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS.

"A blind child who is not organized is doomed." Karen Wolffe 2006

As class teachers, the key to success (and lower stress levels!) with these children is also **for you to be ORGANIZED**.

Our beliefs about blindness will impact on how we educate the blind child. Blind children come with all types of personalities and dispositions.

Hierarchy of Skills:

Listed are the additional skills blind children need in order to access the curriculum you are offering. These skills are developmental and are only mastered with exposure and practise. We believe these are listed in order of priority:

Orientation and mobility skills: this is the ability to move independently and effortlessly in space. It involves self concept and highly developed spatial and language concepts.

Organizational Skills: this is the ability to identify objects, know their function, their location and be able to manipulate and relocate them at any given time. It requires the child to plan, to order, and label belongings. It requires skills in manipulating the immediate environment.

Self Advocacy Skills: this is the ability to be able to positively articulate what is required to allow the child to participate in the sighted classroom. It requires the child to listen, to develop non aggressive or manipulative language skills and to have an understanding about their blindness.

Social Skills: this is the ability to see themselves as part of a group and to comply with the group norms. It requires the development of language skills that reflect that they are interested in others; it requires the understanding of reciprocity.

Academic Skills: this is the ability to be both numerate and literate. It requires exposure and instruction in Braille, it involves rigour, persistence and discipline on the part of the child. It requires organization on the part of the teacher.

Daily Living Skills: this is the ability to manage personal hygiene and self care.

Recreational Skills: this is the ability to independently entertain yourself. It means making your self "wind swept and interesting" by being interested in what is happening in the world and participating in it.

The blind child who masters these skill sets is the blind child who can be employed.

"Employment is one of the key factors in participating in a quality life". Wolffe 2007

General Principles:

- Never do for the child what they can do for themselves.
- Keep expectations high.
- Start with the child the way you want to finish. Think about where you want them to be at the end of this year and work towards getting there.
- Provide the same information and experiences to all the children in your class, both sighted and blind.
- Assume the same responsibility for all children in the class-not just the sighted. It is your responsibility to ensure that the blind child is numerate and literate.
- Speak directly to the child at all times — use their name to get their attention to turn them into your requests.
- Know their work, know the quality and mark it according to the standards you accept for the other children in your care.
- Blindness is no excuse for lack of engagement or rudeness in the class.
- Know about their equipment. That does not mean you need to know every thing about it. Know where to get help with the equipment. Don't be frightened of it.
- Use sighted words — look, see, and use them often

- The only objective feed back they get about themselves, their work, how they look etc comes from you. So "good for a blind child is not good enough".
- Two things are vital when working with blind children

  Extra space: the blind child needs book shelves or other storage units that the child can locate and organize. Tactual labels are vital on everything. All pieces of work need to be filed away for quick retrieval. Encourage the blind child to take responsibility for all their belongings. They need to do the filing so they know where their work and belongings are. Insist on this right from the beginning.

  Extra time: the sighted child sees the world from largest to smallest; the blind child sees the world from smallest to largest. When the only information you are getting is either through your hands, sounds and smell it is limited. So they need to spend more time tactually examining, discussing and exploring concepts and objects.

Some specifics for the Classroom Teacher

Be more verbal. Verbal description will help the child interpret what is going on in the classroom. Use names when calling on children. When children return from lunch, recess etc spend time allowing the children to identify who they are sitting next to. A simple task of introducing yourself to the person next to you becomes a re acquaintance opportunity.

Provide precise verbal description in place of vague statements and/or motions when modelling an action. "Fold the paper lengthwise" instead of "Fold the paper like this." "Go and stand next to my desk", rather than "go stand over there."

Avoid the "Fairy God Mother syndrome" when things just appear out of nowhere. The art smock suddenly appears on the table because it is time for Art etc.

Talk about what you are doing, if there is silence in the classroom, "We are just waiting for the children to finish their work and then we will all be ready to read a story." *Explain your routine a little to help the blind child interpret situations which he/she cannot see. "I'm so glad you're all being quiet as I get the snack ready."

Verbalize what you write on the board or on overheads; spell out words when appropriate.

Add a few words of explanation when the illustrations in a storybook carry the plot (the blind child will not have access to the picture). Better still ask other children to describe the pictures, this is an excellent speaking activity.

When referring to objects, **think about attributes other than colour,** such as shape, weight, texture, size, and location. Teach colour in association with concepts e.g. Blue sky, green grass, white ice, etc.

A way of reducing stresses and which reinforce organizational skills for the blind child is to **establish predictable routines.** Routines for storage of items, routines for mobility to and from various classes, routines about managing Braille work books etc. Routines about interpersonal skills e.g. ask questions of others, remember names etc. Blind children need routines in how to move around the class room. It is also important that the class teacher establishes routines about where work is placed e.g. don't put finished work on the floor for correction later but put them in a box that is on the floor and next to the teacher's chair.

General class room **rules might need to be explained in greater detail.** E.g. putting your hand up to answer a question; the blind child might need to be shown how to put up his hand and to leave it up etc and then taught when to put it down etc. (The blind child who is still putting his hand up when asked how he is feeling out in the play ground has overgeneralized the rule.) Simple activities like finger rhymes may require one on one instruction. This one on one can be the responsibility of the sighted class mate.

The blind child might need to be taught that it is the **class teacher's voice that is the most important** within the class room … when he/she speaks you listen.

Tell the blind child **what the others are doing,** what is expected, to work at an appropriate pace and if work is not completed there are consequences.

Organize the child's desk area and materials storage area for maximum independence.

Adapt materials or parts of the lesson when necessary.

Provide hands-on opportunities. These will make experiences more meaningful for the blind child.

Offer information instead of help. Instead of getting an object for the child, for example, give the child a chance to find it by describing its size, shape, and location. Then give the child enough time to explore and correct mistakes before you give more prompts.

Understand and **respect the skills of the blind child**. Learn the general sequence of the skills; provide opportunities in the

class for the child to practise, and offer appropriate support as the child is working toward mastery.

Braille reading and writing is the equivalent of print reading and writing. **Learn a little bit of Braille** so you can comment on how "you like the way he has written his name in contracted Braille" etc.

The blind child should be moving about more and more independently as time goes on using orientation and mobility skills. Send him/her on messages.

The child will learn to use sound, memory, mental mapping, and various special tools and will learn to ask for information when needed.

Pace

Here are a few ideas for helping your blind student learn to work at an appropriate pace if you find that he/she is working more slowly than the others in the class. The sighted children have visual cues that tell them how fast they should be moving. They might look at the clock on the wall; they might glance at their classmates' papers to see who is still working on the first side of the page and who has gone on to side two.

You can provide equivalent non visual cues for your blind student. Point out to the blind student the rustling sound of pages turning so he/she can listen for how fast classmates are going. If the child can tell time, a Braille watch or a talking clock could help. Periodically give verbal cues such as "About half of our time is up. You should be on number four or five by now."

Here is another aspect of pace to consider. Classroom teachers are often told that the blind student will take longer to accomplish schoolwork and therefore should be expected to do only part of the assignment. Teachers are often advised, for example, to have the blind child do only the even-numbered problems or every other row or only enough to demonstrate that he/she understands the concept. It is true, especially in the early grades that blind students might take longer to complete an assignment. This is so because the student has not yet mastered the specific blindness skill necessary to perform the task.

For example, the student might be learning how to set up math problems in Braille with his/her Braille machine (Braille writer) or the child might be physically doing more — moving from a workbook page on the desk to an answer sheet in the Braille writer — while their sighted classmates are simply writing the answers on the workbook page.

Sometimes it might seem sensible to cut back a little on one part of the workload while the child is learning or mastering a new skill. If you do, make sure you build in a plan to get the child working up to speed as soon as possible. When blind children become adults and go out on job interviews they won't get the job if they have to say, "I can only do half the work" or "I can only do the even-numbered problems!"

Again, we must keep in mind that we are preparing children for adulthood.

The Role of the Teacher's Aide

One of your first duties we would encourage you to do … is to learn Braille and love it. It is a fun code to crack.

A teacher aide can truly enhance a blind child's educational experience, especially when she or he understands the goal of independence. The aide can help ensure that the student gains a firm understanding of basic concepts, experiences, and situations and is not missing chunks of information. If the blind student's foundation is solid, then he/she will be able to learn higher level material in later years without (or with very little) assistance. In addition, the aide can help the blind child learn the skills of blindness which enable the student to work and move about independently.

The aim of the integration aide is to make yourself redundant. Initially it may be more appropriate to spend time in the class room to support the class teacher but as the child gains more skills, the role of the integration aide is to become the child's "secretary". The role is to ensure that the child has the same work in Braille that is being presented in class to the other children.

It is suggested that the integration aide never sits permanently next to the child. It is important that the blind child learns from other children and they will not do so if an adult is hovering. Remember, the child's desk must be set up for use by the child, not the aide! If the aide has a desk in the room, it should be in another part of the room, not next to the blind child's. This way the teacher and the other children view the blind child as a real part of the class and the child learns to focus on the teacher and not on the aide.

The various functions of an aide can be divided into four general categories:

behind the scenes work

direct assistance

facilitating

enrichment.

Behind the Scenes Work

The behind the scenes work is probably the most important work a teacher aide can do. It consists of the background planning and coordinating that enables the child to function independently in the classroom. If the behind the scenes work is done well, the child will be able to participate on an equal footing with his/her sighted classmates and will have the opportunity to learn all of the concepts and skills presented.

Here are some specifics:

Set up the desk area for maximum independence and organization. The blind child needs to know where books and papers will be kept, where to put completed work, they need to staple print copy to Braille copy so others know what work is what. They need to know where any special items, like stapler and hole punch, will be, and so forth. Items should be within the child's easy reach.

The use of Braille label on the child's table to reinforce timetables or Braille contractions, spelling of days of the week, or proper nouns etc. can be very helpful as the blind child cannot scan the room for additional literacy information.

Purchase Braille folders which can accommodate large Braille sheets.

Place the correct volume of each Braille textbook at the child's desk. Later the older student will take over this task. Make sure special supplies, such as Wikki-Stix, tactile dice, Braille labeller, etc., are ready and in logical places for the child's use. Put them in a "busy box" just like a pencil box so the child can quickly locate needed items.

Continually re-evaluate the situation to keep pace with the child's progress. Identify tasks that are being done for the child which the child could begin doing for him/herself.

Keep track of any special items that come in. Know where they are and learn their uses.

Co-ordinate and plan in advance with the classroom teacher and teacher of the visually impaired. Have a copy of the lesson plans so materials can be adapted in advance and will be ready when the teacher presents that lesson.

Organize Braille in advance and give them to the teacher to hand out along with those for the other children.

Adapt materials for classroom subjects, music, and art. Often adaptations will be quite simple; at times you'll need to analyse the lesson to be learned and then decide upon a good way to present it. Collect materials useful for adapting, such as cardboard, Glu-Colours, Wikki-Stix, Braille labeller, various self-stick textures, drafting tape, tracing wheel, and so forth.

If an adaptation for a lesson consists of something entirely different from what the other children will be using, let the teacher know about it. It might be appropriate for you to show it to the blind child during the lesson and unobtrusively supply information or instructions.

Collect any special materials or manipulative requirements for the day's lessons; transport them to other rooms if the children change classes.

If Braille worksheets are going home for homework, staple a print copy on top for the parents. Attach a print copy of the child's work to all Braille that is put in their folder. In time ensure that the blind child does the stapling.

If the child needs to hand in a printed copy of work for the teacher, ensure that they have put Braille label on the paper so they know where to file it when they get it back.

If the school has a Braille printer and a Braille translation program, the aide can use a computer to produce many learning materials in Braille. Worksheets, tests, last minute items, school announcements, programs for assemblies, the lunch menu, and any other materials not Brailled by the transcribing service can be produced. The aide does not need to know Braille (although some rudimentary knowledge is suggested) to produce Braille by computer.

A Braille printer can also be used to Braille out the teacher's comments and corrections. These may be attached to the child's papers so that he/she gets feedback on schoolwork in the same manner and at the same time his/her classmates get it.

Use Glu-Colours, bits of Wikki Stix, or other tactual materials to mark mistakes on papers that the teacher has graded so the child can analyse his/her own mistakes. Provide a series of tactile stamps, it doesn't matter what they look like as long as the child can feel that some stamps are for okay work and some stamps are for good work and maximum effort.

Incidentally, the behind the scenes work is automatically done for sighted children so that they can perform at their best. Desks are designed so that books and pencils fit and can be put in logical places. Books, manipulatives, and other learning tools are all ready on the first day of school. Diagrams, maps, and charts are included in their books in usable formats. Posters and bulletin boards in the classroom provide additional learning opportunities. The behind the scenes work for a blind student serves to set up an equivalent learning environment. As time goes on, more and more behind the scenes work will need to be done, but only as long as the blind student has had a strong base in elementary level academics and blindness skills. With a strong foundation in these skills the older blind student can be expected to learn how to use the aide as his/her support staff and secretary not his personal assistant.

Direct Assistance

When people think of the function of an aide in a classroom with a blind student, they most often picture the aide sitting at the child's side helping with every task. While the child may indeed need assistance in the early years, it is crucial to keep in mind the goal of independent participation in school (and in life). The child must learn to do tasks for him/herself and should be expected to learn to do any task that is going to be repeated every day, such as opening the milk carton in the cafeteria or placing homework papers in the homework basket.

What is appropriate help? In general, appropriate help is the kind that teaches the skill. One way to think about it is to ask yourself — "Is the help I am giving the kind that will teach the child how to do the task on his/her own? Or am I doing the task for the child?" For example, putting the child's papers into his/her backpack at the end of the day is one form of help, but teaching the child to pack the bag is a more useful form of help.

Another useful way to judge the kind of help you are providing is to think about age-appropriateness. It might be appropriate for an aide to help a preschooler locate the hook in the cubby and hang up the backpack or to help with zipping up the child's jacket. However, this would no longer be appropriate for a Year 4 child.

Other appropriate times for direct assistance might be in art and sport or Physical Education. In PE, for example, an aide could help the child locate a certain area of the room that is not tactually marked or could help the child participate in activities such as soccer or basketball. Even then, an aide should be as unobtrusive as possible. They should also be alert at all times to ways they can promote interaction between the blind student, the teacher, and other students in the class. Of course, in all cases, when the child is able to participate on his/her own, the aide should not interfere (go have coffee). When an aide does directly assist a child, they should make sure they respect the child's personal space.

In general, if the planning is built in for independence and if sufficient instruction and practice time are provided, less and less help will be needed as time goes on. From the beginning there should be a plan for the time when the aide will no longer be present or providing direct assistance.

Facilitating

Facilitating involves helping the child learn to perform tasks as a competent blind person. Facilitating requires the aide to have an understanding of the goal of independence, familiarity with the skills and tools of blindness, an overall sense of where the child is in the development of these skills, and an idea of what the next logical step would be.

Here are some ways an aide can facilitate:

Encourage appropriate exploration. The young blind child, especially, needs certain information about the environment in order to function independently. Guide the child so the child can make discoveries. Avoid touching the child's hands, guide with the elbow rather than hands.

Help the child **understand the classroom scene** and learn how to respond appropriately. E.g. establish a routine by which his/her class mates or the class teacher explains why all the children are laughing etc

Give cues rather than help; keep stepping back.

Serve as a reader. This should be a limited activity for an aide. A reader is someone (paid or volunteer) who reads print material to a blind person either directly or by recording it onto an audio file. Blind adults use readers on the job and in their homes for personal mail and other material. A child's need for readers will increase in the higher classes. A reader can be a member of his class or his buddy not necessarily the integration aide all the time. In order to direct and use a reader effectively, the blind student must be familiar with various print page formats, headings, captions, contents, indexes, etc. Discuss these concepts with the child, with the books that are prepared by the Statewide Vision Resource Centre as they adhere to strict Braille formatting that corresponds with the sighted page.

Facilitate social interaction and friendships. Teach the blind child to introduce themselves and to remember special things about their class mates.

Give the child **discreet feedback** on appropriate postures and behaviours. Correct the blind child the way you would a sighted child who was facing the wrong way or was otherwise situated incorrectly e.g. encourage them to point their nose to where they can hear someone speaking.

Help the blind child learn and do what is expected in activities requiring partners, for example, in cooperative learning activities in the classroom; square dancing in gym; or preparing for a concert or a play in music.

Remind sighted children (and adults) to identify themselves to the blind child — "Hi, Sarah, it's Jennifer." Remind the blind child to ask the identity of those speaking to him/her or those next to him/her at lunch or in line. "Hi. Who's this in front of me?"

Give the blind child information about what classmates are doing during in-class and playground recess. If needed, **teach appropriate responses to what other children say and do.**

If necessary, **teach the blind child how to play the games** classmates are playing. Teach the blind child ways to get into games. Teach them playground manners and protocols children (and adults) expect everyone to follow. For example, Jennifer has just gone down the slide. She walks around back to the steps. A line has formed. Does she know she is supposed to find the end of the line and wait? Does she know how to ask for the end of the line? Do the other children know they should call out and let her know where the end of the line is? It's a simple matter to stand back and teach this when the opportunity occurs. "Jennifer, there are five kids in line. You need to wait your turn. John, call out so Jennifer knows where you are so she can find you and wait behind you for her turn."

Teach the sighted children how to get the blind child's attention. "Mike, Jennifer can't see you wave your arm to her. If you want her to come over you need to say, 'Over here Jennifer, by the big swings.'"

Be matter-of-fact about blindness. Teach everyone to think, "Let's figure out a way to get a blind kid into this game."

Facilitate independent mobility. Use the cane as much as possible. It is this independence in mobility around the school that is the precursor for independence in mobility around his/her local environment. Encourage the child to walk home with sighted peers.

Help the child master daily routes such as changing classes, trips to the school office, going to the bathroom, getting a drink of water, and so forth. First talk the child through the route, then follow at a close enough distance to give verbal cues if needed, next watch from a distance. Don't always rush to help. Be sure **to allow time for independent problem-solving.** Finally, get out of the picture as soon as possible. The goal is for the child to move about within the school with the same degree of independence as sighted peers.

Don't lead the child around.

Enrichment

A teacher's aide has the potential to enrich the blind student's educational experience in meaningful ways that can deepen the child's understanding and appreciation.
An aide, for example, can ensure that the **blind child is exposed to the many concepts presented through "environmental print,"** the posters, bulletin boards, announcements, children's work, etc. that surround them in the classroom. Once the blind child is aware that this kind of

information exists, then he/she is on the road to learning how and when to get it for him/herself.

Here is another way in which an aide can enrich the child's experience. Print books are full of photographs which illustrate many concepts for the students. At times, the aide might be able **to provide real objects for the blind child to examine** or could mention the need to the classroom teacher, teacher of the visually impaired, and family, one of whom might have access to the item. An aide might also notice an area in which the child has incomplete information and could alert the teachers and family to this.

Other examples of enrichment are **provided by giving verbal description** of videos, school assemblies, school programs, plays, and school field trips. Showing special objects related to the assembly or excursions to the child before or after the activity is also an important enrichment experience.

The Importance of Good Judgment

Start from the presumption that the blind child can always participate in an activity, you might need to consult with your Visiting teacher or the Staff at the SVRC, but full participation is the aim.

As an aide, you will find yourself making decisions every few minutes throughout the day. E.g. Should I intervene in this situation or not? We're running out of time, should I do this for the child this one time? Would this be a good time to interrupt the teacher? Should I run into the classroom and give the child this information right now? When can I find some time to fit in these "extras" I've been saving to show the child?

A good understanding of the teacher's routine and priorities and of the functioning of the classroom will help you make these difficult decisions. Another aid to decision making is gauging your decisions against the goal of independence. In general, over the course of time, make sure that your decisions are helping the child to progress in independence. Don't fall into the habit of assisting too much. Try to develop a good feel for when to step in and when to step back. Teachers and aides should get paid double time for the time they spend waiting for the blind child to make a response or finish a task.

Another useful exercise is to think about the consequences of the decisions you make. How will what I am about to do affect this child? **What unspoken messages are my actions sending?**

Watch for These Common Danger Areas!

1. Learned Dependence

The most common pitfall of having an aide in the classroom is that instead of learning more about independence each day, the blind child learns more about dependence. It is easy to assist too much — to open the book for the child; to find the page; to lead the child around. The appropriate role for the aide is to facilitate problem solving. If the aide gives too much help, the child will not learn to do the tasks and will not develop an inner expectation that he/she should be doing them.

Don't hover. Don't overprotect. Keep a watchful eye. Use good judgment. Step in when necessary, but base your interventions on the idea of an independent future for the child, not on the idea that blind people cannot be expected to do certain tasks. Don't try and over protect the child from hurting himself. School is about rough and tumble.

How is the aide referred to at your school? Is he/she considered a personal aide to the child or an aide to the teacher? If the aide is referred to as the child's aide, then the blind child and his/her classmates might get the impression that the blind child is helpless or in need of constant protection or supervision. You might want **to use the term "teacher's aide" or "classroom aide"** instead. As always, think of the future, the child must be encouraged in normal steps toward independence and responsibility for him/herself.

It is important, too, that the school principal understands the goal of independence and that this goal means that there may be times (more and more as time goes on) that the **aide is not giving any assistance at all to the blind child.** At all times when the child is able to work unassisted, the aide must feel free to "do nothing." If the aide feels that she will be criticized for "doing nothing" she will be more likely to hover near the child, thereby interfering with the process of independence.

With school administrators' input and approval, **a plan could be set in place for the gradual and sensible lessening of the time the aide spends with the blind student**. For example, if the child is able to participate in music class unassisted, then the plan could be for the aide to leave that room and use the time to consult with the teacher or adapt materials. At first, the aide might walk with the child to and from the class. As time goes on, she would help the child learn the route. Next, as the child became more and more able to handle classroom activities unassisted, the aide could begin to spend less time in the classroom, again using that time to prepare materials and plan.

When the time came that the aide was only rarely needed in the classroom and all materials were prepared, the plan could

be for her to spend, her "free" time assisting in another room. Better yet, if the school has had the foresight to provide Braille training to the aide, the aide may take on more and more Braille transcribing tasks. As the child gets older and the print reading demands get heavier and more varied, Braille transcribing needs increase.

If the principal consciously supports the blind student's movement toward independence, then he/she will not inadvertently edge the child toward learned dependence.

2. A Private Conversation

Another pitfall to avoid is a private conversation developing in the classroom. The aide and the blind child become a separate class in the back of the room. The teacher teaches the class; the aide teaches the blind child. This is inefficient. Occasionally this might be appropriate, for example when the blind student is using completely different materials from those of sighted classmates. But the goal is always for the child to be a full participant in class. The child needs to learn to focus on the teacher, to listen to the instructions, translate them if necessary into what would make sense for Braille or other adaptations, and then get going! Likewise, the teacher needs to focus on the student and direct all questions, statements, instructions, and so forth to the student, not the aide.

The aide might enjoy the private conversation; the child might enjoy it. But it won't get the child where the child needs to go.

3. Special Relationships

A related danger area is that of special relationships. Blind children can develop extremely close bonds with the people who work with them one-to-one. These are often warm, enjoyable relationships, but they can interrupt the process

toward independence. A special relationship can keep a child from mastering a task. It can also narrow his/her world, the more people who work with the blind child the more he/she has to gain from differing points of views and values

Special relationships can be a problem in another area. Because they are usually with adults or older children, these relationships can prevent friendships with peers from developing. Everyone gets used to seeing the blind child with the aide. The adults at school get used to it and, of even greater concern, so do the other children. It also becomes so normal and comfortable to the blind child that he/she does not develop the self-expectation for normal social interactions with peers.

It is very tempting to let special relationships develop — they come out of the goodness of people's hearts — but they are not, in the long run, in the best interest of the blind child.

That special relationship can also be so close that behaviour that is not appropriate is viewed as part of the child's disposition rather than a trait that needs modification.

4. The Special Helper

Sometimes a teacher cannot think of a way to include a blind student in an activity or does not think the blind child is capable of doing a certain task. To solve the dilemma this presents, the teacher might make the child a special helper. All the other students are doing an academic task and the teacher says to the blind student, "You sit next to me and help me pass out the pencils." When situations like this occur, the blind child is not getting the equivalent educational experience.

Occasionally this might be acceptable, but certainly not if it occurs frequently.

If you are having trouble figuring out how to include your blind student in an activity, analyse what is to be learned and think about possible ways to get the message across. There is almost always a simple adaptation that can be made. If you can't think of a way, ask someone else — the teacher of the visually impaired, the parents, a blind adult or staff at the SVRC — for ideas. But don't leave the child out. We have a legal responsibility to include all children in the curriculum being offered.

Acting on Assumptions of Help Needed

So many times sighted people assume that the blind child cannot do something independently. The assumption is usually based on that old idea of the helpless blind person or the idea that eyesight is necessary to accomplish the task. So often the assumption will not be true; the child can actually do the task. Perhaps you think the child will be unsafe on the stairs. Perhaps you think the child lacks the ability to find the door handle to open the door, or you can't imagine how the child will be able to carry a drink, bag, laptop and a cane.

But working blind people do all of these things every day. We've got to get our blind children to be able to do all of it, too, so that they will be working blind people someday! So question your assumptions and always be open to changing and raising your expectations.

Bringing the Day of Independence Closer

Remember that the goal is for the child to be a full, independent participant in class and in life. The child should become more and more independent as time passes. The balance must shift from more individual help and less independence in the early years, to less individual help and more independence as the child grows older.

Many times teachers can give information instead of help; e.g. give directions to what he/she needs instead of getting it for the child.

A Child should be able to learn any task that is repeated each day; e.g. opening-drink box, using glue sticks, using scissors etc. Assume the child can learn the task.

If the child is not doing something the other children are doing, teach him/her how; if something must be done for a child on a regular basis, let parents know. Perhaps it can be worked on at home.

By understanding and respecting the alternative skills the child is developing, classroom teachers can help the child progress in these skills.

The blind child needs to learn to say "no thank you" more often than "yes thanks" to offers of assistance. As they get older they need to have suggestions of how to present material to them.

Think of it this way, the job should be done by the time the child is eighteen. After high school we want our children to go to the next step. For other children this means a job, TAFE, their own place, or university.

If by age eighteen, a blind student cannot take care of him/herself, travel independently, make his/her own arrangements for readers or transportation or whatever else he/she might use, then that student is not going to make it in the "real" world. And all of us want these children to be able to make it; we need them to be wage earners. So somewhere between the assistance we might give to the preschooler and the independence the student must have by their final year 12,

the shift must occur. Build it in; plan for a future of independence.

The job of a blind child sometimes seems huge to sighted people because we just can't imagine doing things without our eyesight. But I think the children take it in stride. As it was reported to me by a very competent blind adult that life as a blind person is no more frustrating or stressful to them than life with eyesight is to us — as long as you are taught the skills and given the tools you need to accomplish tasks with independence and with success. Life becomes a series of routines that you just know about.

Teaching a blind child.

Blind children need to be taught the "rules of engagement" of every new situation and school is no exception. They need to be taught how to respond to questions, facing the teacher so the teacher can tell he/she is paying attention, raising hand high, when to lower hand, when to answer aloud in unison with class, etc.

These "rules of engagement" mean understanding "teacher language." For example, in ordinary English a "who question" would be answered with a name, but in the classroom, "Who can tell me what 5 plus 2 is?" means, "Raise your hand." A "how many" question would ordinarily get a number for an answer, but in the classroom "How many of you put the big hand on the 3?" means raise your hand if you did it that way. Hearing the teacher say your name (getting "called-on") usually means, "Say the answer out loud."

They need to learn to hold their head up and "point their nose" to where they hear the speaker's voice so they look as if they are paying attention.

Blind children in the class room need to know how to ask questions or to have an understanding of timetabling to interpret activity around them. E.g. after I finish this maths sheet I need to get ready for Art and the other children are moving so I must be behind with my work.

Other children can see that what their peers are up to with their work; they can also see the standard. Blind children need to understand about the pace of the classroom and work and the standard. "By the time this timer goes off you should have completed half of this work sheet."

Provide a Braille copy of other children's work so they can see for themselves exactly what the other children achieve.

Eventually, how to figure out all of the above by him/herself.

BRAILLE.

For a blind child Braille is the underpinning of all literacy.

Children produced Braille on Braille machines. These machines are the child's pencils. There are several types of Braille machines. Children generally have a Perkins Brailler which is heavy and grey and generally used for Maths but that can be taken to and from school for the children to do their homework. Another Braille machine is called a Mountbatten. The Mountbatten is an electronic version of the Perkins. It can be connected to a computer and used as a facility to produce Braille (an embosser).

The Braille "cell" is made up of six dots which correspond to the six keys on the Braille machine. Dots are numbered 1 to 6 in columns two dots across and three down. The Braille cell fits under the pad of the finger tip and with practice can be

efficiently discriminated by movement of the fingers from left to right.

Each Braille letter or other symbol is formed using one or more of the six dots. Capital letters are formed by placing a dot 6 before the letter.

Punctuation marks look like letters but they are formed in the lower part of the cell.

In literary Braille, the first ten letters are also the numbers when preceded by an arrangement of dots called the number sign (dots 3, 4, 5 ,6).

Without Braille the child's understanding of spelling, grammar, and the simple pleasure of understanding the lives of others through reading, is limited.

Braille reading and writing is the equivalent of print reading and writing. It is simply a code that can be cracked.

Braille is talked about in terms of being uncontracted (Grade One braille and nothing to do with the grade the child is in), and Contracted (Grade Two braille). This simply means that Grade One Braille is the direct one for correspondence of printed alphabet to the Braille dots (alphabet). Contracted Braille has short cuts and these short cuts are called contractions. This is where the code system comes in. There appears to be no rhyme or reason to these contractions other than Braille was designed, originally in France, so blind people could read their Bibles. Thus words like "knowledge", "Lord", "spirit" have shortcuts.

Crack the code by learning the Braille Lessons. The SVRC can provide a series of correspondence lessons that will have you

reading and writing Braille after 15 quick lessons. Go for it. It's fun. You will amaze and impress your family and friends with this unique skill.

The introduction of contracted Braille is not related to the grade of the child. It is determined by the skill of the child and the ability of the students' support staff. Consult your Visiting Teacher or staff of the SVRC regarding these important educational decisions. The quicker the child gets the code under their belt the more proficient they become and the better they are able to stand independently with their peers. The SVRC will have a series of Braille reading programs and curriculum programs produced to support you in getting the children moving with their Braille.

Blind children often find spelling a difficult process because of lack of exposure to the printed work. The Braille contractions are not based on phonetic blends or syllables and often are organized visually so the reinforcement of spelling applications does not occur.

Reading and spelling are different skills. With contracted Braille (Grade Two) the children will be reading the words fully contracted before they can spell all the words, just like sighted children.

For blind children to learn to spell they need to learn two components of words. They need to know the core curriculum information, just like sighted kids, the phonetic awareness stuff (sound-symbol association, syllabifications etc) and then they need to know the blind specific information which is — What are the letters that make up each contraction, word sign, and abbreviation? E.g. blind children who are reading contracted Braille will never see the word "THE" spelt out. They will see a symbol that represents all three letters. This

means that a word like "other" would have three components to that word; they would see "o" and then "THE" contraction and "r". They learn that there are a group of words that are called dot 5 words. These words comprise two symbols, dot five and then usually the first letter of the work. E.g. Mother is brailled dot 5 and M. So as you can see, spelling the word "mother" needs to be taught in an uncontracted form and then in Braille form.

Braille depends on finger movements to be felt. A still finger cannot read Braille. It is also very easy to make reversal errors in Braille as many Braille letters are the reverse of another letter or contraction. Therefore, feeling the letters the wrong way (i.e. reading from right to left) can result in future difficulties.

The most efficient Braille readers use two hands and many fingers. The fingers of the right hand are the reading fingers and the fingers on the left hand are the checking fingers. This again ensures that fingers do not go backwards over the Braille to re-read a word or phrase. Also, fingers can suffer injuries. If you only read with one finger and it gets a scab or scar, you can suddenly become unable to read!

Braille labels are a fabulous way of keeping curious hands engaged with letters and literacy. Idle fingers can try reading Braille stuck to the desk or folders. The flashcards, days of the week, anything can have Braille label on it to keep the fingers interested.

Why not raised letters? This question is very reasonable and is often asked by children who learn Braille after knowing print. Research has shown that the shapes of letters are too similar to be discriminated accurately by fingers.

Organization

Organization of the Braille books means placing them in easy to get at book cases. They need to be organized in order.

Written work, worksheets or the book should be on the table next to the Mountbatten Brailler for the student to read; and the answer sheet should be in the Braillewriter.

If manipulatives are used, place in small box or tray so they will not fall off the desk. In the box should be stapler, hole punch, Wikki Stix, pen for putting holes in for corrections (the pen is used to put a hole in the paper to identify mistakes, just like a red pen identifies mistakes in print), Braille label.

For marking answers, the blind student can use crayon, pencil, small pieces of Wikki-Stix, magnets and magnet board, push pins. (The advantage of Wikki-Stix, magnets, and push pins is that the child can check his/her own work; with Wikki-Stix, work can be saved to take home.)

Help the child organize the work space; have a clear place in front and put materials nearby in common sense places.

Stick-on Braille (Dymotape) can be used for quick labelling.

Foil purchased from Vision Australia (557 St Kilda Road Melbourne ph. [03] 9522 5222) can be used for quick drawings and explanations.

*Hi-Mark, t-shirt markers, Elmer's glue, and Sticki-Wikki can be used for outlining figures. (Hi-Mark and t-shirt markers must be used in advance, for they take hours to dry.)

*Stick-on Velcro, cork, felt, etc. can be used for variety on math worksheets.

It is a huge benefit to the Braille learner if as many people as possible in their home and school community can also learn Braille. This will mean that Braille notes can be produced for the child and they can also produce Braille notes for others. This will mean that everyone will see Braille as a means of communication and that it is something that we are all capable of learning, instead of something that is a difficult skill to master. Sighted people learn to read Braille by looking at the symbols rather then by using their fingers.

The use of the Cane:

The cane for the blind child is their eyes for travel; it is an extension of their arm. It is the device that keeps them safe and gives them comfortable mobility. It is essential to a child's independence. Encourage its use at all times so that the blind child develops confidence in their own skills.

The cane is held so that it lands about three steps in front of the feet, and is swept side to side. The cane gives a preview of what is ahead: Is the way clear? or Is an object in the way? Stairs up or down, can be located and negotiated. Objects such as rubbish bins, chairs, desks, and outdoor play equipment can be located and identified.

Sound is an important element in cane travel. As the blind child walks down a hallway he/she can use his/her hearing to tell the difference between a wall and an opening, such as a doorway or intersecting hallway. Therefore, the child can be given directions such as "the office is the first opening on the left" or "the toilet is the second open door on the right".

By listening to the sounds and echoes the cane makes when it is tapped, the child gets information about the space around him/her and, with practice, can tell how far he/she is from the walls and furniture.

Textures and slopes beneath the feet — differences between tile, carpeting, concrete, etc. will help the child know where he/she is.

The child will use landmarks (the rug outside the office door, the hum of the water fountain, etc.) for self-orienting. So make sure the child is told when key environmental land marks are changed or broken.

The child will learn to make a mental map — information linking one part of the room or building to another — of an area.

The child might not use the cane in the classroom but should always have it with him/her outside the room; e.g. canteen, playground, fire-drills, office, gym.

Sighted guide is the technique that blind people use when they are walking with a sighted person. It is a skilful thing to watch if it is done with skill and dignity. Orientation and Mobility instruction teach this skill. Know about it and insist on using this technique rather than holding hands or having the blind child hold on to someone all the time.

Tactual Exploration

Looking at objects with the hands takes time. The blind child gets information tactually just as sighted children get it visually. The difference between sight and tactual "looking" is that with sight one examines the entire object first and then examines the detail i.e. "sighted people go from big to little" With touch you examine the detail and then make generalizations i.e. "blind people go from little to big".

Allow the blind child to tactually explore a room to make a mental map and find out where things are placed, and then if you move them teach the blind child the new mental map. This

is part of the routine development in the brain of the blind child.

Introduce other senses into the class setting:

Introduce smells and sounds into the classroom. There are different ways to identify a variety of people in the school, some wear perfume, others aftershave, some have a lanyard of keys around their neck while others may have jangling jewellery.

Keep the class room quiet so the blind child can develop his ability to use sound localization that is, the ability to tell where a sound is coming from. "Jenny, I think your pencil just dropped. It sounds like it rolled toward the door. Look under Peter's chair; it might be there." "That sounds like the door of the storage cupboard in the back of the room. Must be time for art; I can hear Mrs. Wood getting the cans of paint out."

Develop a memory about details of other children and relevant people in the blind child's life. Teachers need to give them this information. Melissa has thick, long hair. Tom is Sudanese so has dark skin, Kate and Doris are Vietnamese so have almond eyes.

Teach the child to ask questions quietly "Who just walked into the room?" "Is this the bus for swimming?" This also includes learning to give a polite, but firm "No thank you" when assistance is not needed.

Use sound localization to direct child; e.g. he/she can join the other children by moving toward their voices; can listen for footsteps in order to follow in line; can come when called by walking toward your voice; can find the chair when you tap it with your hand.

Hands-on opportunities along with verbal descriptions will make experiences much more meaningful for a young blind child; e.g. on a trip to the principal's office let the child explore by touch the scale of the room i.e. he needs to know that generally Principals don't share offices, they have computers, meeting areas etc. their office is different to the PE teachers or the Reading Recovery teachers room etc. You are teaching them that the term "office" can mean many different things.

With objects that ordinarily would not be handled, let the child tactually examine it, if possible, before rather than after the activity.

Tell the child to "look with two hands" or "use both hands" when examining with one hand or a few fingers almost no information is obtained.

Facilitate appropriate play with others and by self.
Remind the child to face the person with whom he/she is talking i.e. head up is better than head down.

Insist the child learn to face the correct way in general. A rule of thumb is to give the blind child the same instruction or correction you would give a sighted child who was situated in an inappropriate way. Posture for the blind child is critical to how others view them. Insist on excellence in stance, sitting, eye contact and turn slightly towards the speaker. They can also show interest by leaning forward when people are speaking to them. These skills need to be taught.

Develop a strategy that is tactual and or verbal, i.e. rubbing the child's back or saying an agreed word such as "buttons" when they start poking at their eyes. Blind children tend to eye press; and this is a very anti social "blindism" it is very inappropriate behaviour which is best discouraged.

All blind children need to know how to write their name so to eventually develop a signature. They will need to pay for things using a credit card consequently they will need an appropriate signature. Position crayons correctly in the child's hand for normal muscle development. Let them draw using a wire frame, paper and crayons.

The Role of the Visiting Teachers.

The role of the Visiting Teacher is to teach the skills that are not normally provided in a regular school curriculum.

Their role is to teach what is called the Expanded Core Curriculum. Components of this curriculum are:
Written Communications (Braille), Compensatory Technology, Orientation and Mobility, Organizational Skills, Self Advocacy and Self Determination Skills, Recreation and Leisure Skills, Employment and Career Skills, and Daily Living Skills.

In your class room the roles can often get blurred. Here is an example of role responsibility:

The concept being taught is multiplication:

- The class teachers' responsibility is to ensure that the child has the necessary entry concepts to master the concept of multiplication. It is then his/her responsibility to ensure that the blind child (and all the other children) understand that "multiplication" is repeated addition.
- The role of the visiting teacher is to ensure that the child knows the Braille code for numbers and the multiplication sign and can use their brailler to set out equations and use an abacus to get the correct answer.
- The role of the aide is to ensure that the blind child has the work sheet in Braille and the necessary materials available to them to demonstrate that they can complete the task.

The Visiting Teacher is part of the team, whose prime responsibility is to be the child's advocate and to see the bigger picture for the future of the child and to constantly be presenting the long term goals of independence and participation to the entire school community.

In conclusion:
Having a blind child as part of your school community is a wonderful, exciting and at time scary opportunity — enjoy it!