# Education of Students who are

# Gifted and Visually Impaired

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Children and youth who are gifted and talented, by virtue of outstanding abilities, require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those typically provided to students of average ability. Students who are gifted and talented (a) “perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment... in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas,” (b) “possess an unusual leadership capacity,” or (c) excel in specific academic fields” (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, pg. 26). Students who are gifted exhibit the wide range of physical and/or sensory abilities, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status represented in the general population. However, students who are both gifted and visually impaired often remain ineligible for programs and services because the visual impairment itself masks or suppresses the gifts and talents. Special education must be provided in order for students who are gifted and visually impaired to achieve their potential through implementation of a well-planned, systematic program based on individual needs, abilities, and disabilities

Students who are both gifted and visually impaired need programs and placement options that respond to their needs in four areas: (a) identification; (b) curricular modifications; (c) psychological needs and counseling; and (d) specially trained teachers and support services.

# Identification

Identifying giftedness in children who are visually impaired is a complicated process at best. Norms are not well established for adapted editions of tests (brailled or taped), enlarged print seldom reproduces graphics accurately, and lower scores may actually reflect the inability of tests to capture and discern intelligence based on non-visual behaviors. Additionally, as Gardner (1993) points out, superior abilities can be demonstrated in a variety of areas, singly and in combination. Alternate assessment procedures advocated for use with students who are gifted and talented (Renzulli, 1994) and which may be particularly applicable for students with visual impairments, are still in experimental usage with the general population, but demonstrate the potential to identify a broader range of students based on multiple factors without exclusive reliance on test scores. Other barriers which hamper the identification process in assessing the true potential of students with visual disabilities are caused by factors such as lowered expectations for students with visual impairments generally, poor self-concept, non-challenging environments, and/or lack of learning opportunities imposed by the visual impairment itself.

Variations in learning media, concept development, and learning styles specific to students with visual impairments should be considered in selected instruments and approaches for the assessment of students who are gifted and visually impaired. In addition to standardized tests, tools for identifying students who are gifted and visually impaired might include examination of students’ problem-solving abilities and strategies, documentation of creative compensatory strategies for coping with their visual impairments, student-developed portfolios reflecting work done both at home and at school, parent interviews and/or journals, and teacher interviews.

# Improved Educational Options

Educators of students who are gifted and educators of students who are visually impaired must collaborate, focusing on the full range of human development toward potential. By acknowledging special needs among students who are gifted and visually impaired, the level of instruction for all children will be improved. Combined efforts are needed to promote research and to encourage application of theory and innovative programs.

# Curricular Modifications

The most pressing problem faced by students with visual impairments is access to the curriculum. Most educational curricula are based on the premise that students have normal vision; without translation into alternative media, concepts, abstractions and synthesis of the curriculum may be lost or severely delayed in students with visual impairments. This extends as well to verbal descriptions and incidental learning which takes place daily in the classroom. While teachers of students with visual impairments cannot accompany students throughout the day, they should be integrallyinvolved with the students’ programs, providing learning materials in adapted media, as well as assisting the other teachers in providing non-visual examples and references. These issues are equally important when students with visual impairments are also gifted, since the gifted curriculum-whether it is enriched or advanced-is no more accessible simply because the student has been identified as gifted.

Students who are gifted and visually impaired should also be given the communication skills, adaptive techniques, activities of daily living, and mobility skills when they need them, rather than when a particular curriculum recommends their introduction. At times, the curriculum may also need to be compacted (Reis, Burns, Renzulli 1992), in order to allow time for exploring students’ interests and developing dormant and unrecognized talents.

# Support Services

Support services for students who are gifted and with visually impaired should include three components: Instant access to materials available to sighted peers. Given the quantity and pace of reading and analysis typically required in classes for students who are gifted, it is imperative that materials in appropriate alternative media be made accessible virtually instantly to students with visual impairments. Otherwise, they may fall behind-not because they cannot read and analyze as effectively as their peers with sight, but because they simply so not have the materials in time to do so.

# Alternative Assistive Technology

Since it often takes longer for students with visual impairments to complete assignments, due to factors such as slower reading speeds and increased time for note-taking and/or review, anything which makes access to information easier or more efficient--whether technology, low vision devices, or strategies for personal resourcefulness-should have high priority for these students. In addition to making necessary materials more quickly and easily accessible, a number of currently accessible on-line information services can provide these students with opportunities essential to facilitating their individual research interests and learning opportunities.

# Mentoring by adults who are gifted and visually impaired

Students who are gifted and visually impaired frequently do not realize how other persons who are gifted and visually impaired handle disability-specific situations, how they perform a variety of traditional or innovative careers, or how they learn about and utilize the newest advances in assistive technology. Adults who are gifted and visually impaired can serve as models, listeners, and advisors, while at the same time providing valuable information and mentioning.

# Psychosocial Needs

Because of their “twice exceptional” status, students who are gifted and visually impaired must have enhanced opportunities for development in several areas. The self-esteem of these students is potentially at risk as a result of a variety of external and internal factors (Tutee, 1984). The risk to self-esteem increases because of the difficulty of finding others like themselves; other students who are gifted cannot relate to their visual impairment, and students who are visually impaired cannot relate to their. Since research indicates that appropriate social skills are a potential problem for both students who are gifted (Borland, 1989) and students with visual impairments (Erin, Dignan, & Brown, 1991; Sacks, Kekelis, & Gaylord-Ross, 1992), these skills-particularly the skill of valuing differences-must be emphasized. Just as important as the development of good social skills is the development of good intrapersonal skills (Gardner, 1993; Tuttle, 1994), including such diverse abilities as resourcefulness and initiative, understanding self, response to failure (Tuttle, 1984), informed choice-making (Tuttle, 1994), and achieving balance between work and play (Tuttle, 1994).

# Especially Trained Teachers

Educators must be adequately trained at both pre-and in-service levels if they are to realize their responsibility to students who are gifted and visually impaired. Training can improve educational options for students who are gifted and visually impaired by addressing and developing competence in the following areas: Knowledge of student abilities, disabilities, gifts, and talents, and how these constructs affect learning; Methods of developing disability-specific skills designed as alternatives to visual learning; Implications of the visual impairment on the identification process for gifted programs; Ability to distinguish between true gifts and talents and abilities which are typical and expected of students with visua impairments; Understanding that overprotectiveness may lead to learned helplessness, which can limit risk taking and suppress the development of gifts and talents; Strategies necessary for academic assessment, curricular development, and curricular modification; Use of assistive devices, technology, and support services which go beyond basic skill development and enable students to be responsible for their own learning; Awareness of the psychosocial needs of students who are gifted and visually impaired which are created by this unique combination of ability and disability; Strategies which promote resourcefulness and initiative-taking, provide opportunities for informed choices and allow failure while celebrating success; Development of social skills and relationships with peers with and without disabilities, and with adult mentors who are also gifted and visually impaired. Collaboration and team-building with families and other professionals; Realistic expectations in regard to gifts, talents, and visual disabilities.

# Position

The Division on Visual Impairments of the Council for Exceptional Children believes that special consideration must be given to the issues facing those who are twice exceptional. The circumstances created by this twice exceptional status produce unique needs for students who are gifted and visually impaired that are qualitatively different from the needs of each group of which they are a part. Education requires the cultivation of students’ special gifts and talents, while simultaneously meeting the unique needs created by visual impairments. For students who are gifted and visually impaired, special education services must go beyond traditional deficit-based or compensatory approaches and toward enriching experiences which develop and build upon gifts and talents. Students with visual impairments should be assessed for an included in programs for students who are gifted. Simultaneously , parents should be fully advised, consulted and informed concerning their child’s total needs and learning requirements. Once identification has occurred, decisions regarding educational options and settings, curriculum, and counseling services should address the student’s giftedness, visual handicap, and individual needs.

# Readings

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