

# The Changing Role and Practice of Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments: Practitioners' Views from Australia

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**Structured Abstract:** *Introduction:* This study examined the everyday work of eight teachers of students with visual impairments at governmental primary and secondary schools in Queensland, Australia. The small-scale study aimed to capture the scope and complexity of the activities of these teachers and the regular challenges they face in their expected everyday roles. *Methods:* Telephone interviews were used to collect descriptive data from the teachers. A direct field-sampling procedure was used across the governmental schools to recruit qualified and specialist teachers who met prespecified criteria, most of whom lived in Brisbane, Queensland's capital city. The content of the interviews was generated from two sequenced activities with a different group of experienced teachers of students with visual impairments. *Results:* The teachers carried out complex and demanding duties as part of their everyday roles. These duties were consistent with those performed by their counterparts around the world. The most frequently performed and most important activities including providing direct support to students, advocating for students' needs, and collaborating across school and community contexts. The identified challenges were linked primarily to the lack of time to undertake important activities. *Discussion:* Three important and interconnected findings can be drawn from the results: role complexity, time and collaboration, and the importance of the expanded core curriculum. *Implications for Practitioners:* The findings provide an initial snapshot of the changing role reported by the teachers. Thus, these data offer a beginning point for future probes into the workplace knowledge and skills required by teachers of students with visual impairments.

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Teachers of students with visual impairments are qualified specialist teachers who have expertise and practical experience in the field of visual impairments (Spungin & Ferrell, 2000; Tuttle & Ferrell, 1995).

Across countries and educational contexts, inclusion has brought about changes in these teachers' role. On a day-to-day basis, teachers of students with visual impairments (that is those who are blind or have

low vision) work in assorted partnerships with staff members and families to maximize access to the curriculum, engagement in learning, and educational outcomes for students with visual impairments.

Three key influences are continuing to shape the everyday responsibilities and duties of these teachers. First, the delivery of education to students in regular classrooms has resulted in teachers of students with visual impairments spending substantial time sharing information and providing specialist support to regular classroom teachers (Holbrook & Koenig, 2000; Suvak, 2004). Second, because of medical and technological advances, up to 50% of

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children with visual impairments have one or two additional disabilities (Pagliano, 1998). Hence, demands for expert knowledge and more flexible teaming arrangements have increased. Third, the systemic need for data-driven decision making has intensified paperwork tasks related to curriculum planning, specific instruction, and specialized assessments (Bishop, 2004; Spungin & Ferrell, 2000).

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A number of common work descriptors for teachers of students with visual impairments have been identified. One is the complexity of the work (Benton, 1984)—the need to constantly adjust learning environments and students' plans, the ongoing sharing of information across staff members and families, and the routine updating of technical knowledge. Another is the uniqueness of the role (Sacks, 1998)—the nature of visual impairments has resulted in teachers of students with visual impairments working with a low-incidence population of students with extremely distinct educational and social needs. Still another is the flexibility and diversity of expected practice (Kim & Corn, 1998; Lewis, 2010)—teachers of students with visual impairments are required to work with a diverse group of students with visual impairments across a range of educational settings. For these reasons, the everyday work of these teachers has also been described as challenging (Swenson, 1995).

Over the past two decades, a small number of studies in North America have examined the role and practice of teachers of students with visual impairments. Spungin and Ferrell (1990) attempted to reduce confusion about the role, function, and responsibilities of these teachers in the United States. They drew on earlier work (Spungin & Taylor, 1986) to devise an explicit list of teachers' responsibilities. In July 2010, the list was updated (Spungin & Ferrell, 2010); one area was renamed educational and instructional strategies (accessing the general curriculum) and a new area was inserted—education and instructional strategies (teaching the expanded core curriculum, ECC). Dote-Kwan, Chen, and Hughes (2001)

surveyed 121 early education teachers in California to determine their professional roles, responsibilities, and competencies. Their participants strongly agreed that 12 prime professional responsibilities were required for working with young children with visual impairments, including visual skills training. The study Wolffe and colleagues conducted in 2002 on teachers of students with visual impairments in six states investigated whether these teachers actually “teach that which is deemed necessary for students to become confident, independent, and employable young adults” (p. 295). They found that the teachers tended to focus on academic instruction and spent less time teaching students disability-specific skills within the ECC, engaging students in activities to improve communication skills, and consulting with general education teachers.

In a large-scale study across the United States and Canada, Griffin-Shirley et al. (2004) surveyed 422 itinerant teachers to determine their future needs, job satisfaction, and current responsibilities. They found that the staff spent an average of eight hours per week carrying out nonteaching duties, seven hours per week teaching functional academic skills, and two hours per week teaching orientation and mobility (O&M) skills. In another extensive study, Suvak (2004) surveyed 322 teachers of students with visual impairments in Colorado to determine their everyday responsibilities. Although the teachers used the majority of their time teaching braille reading and writing, the most frequently performed duties included ordering books and materials, teaching O&M, and producing large-print materials.

The changing role and practice of teachers of students with visual impairments has created interest as well as concern. Some Australian educational systems and professional organizations have created documents that include expectations and directions for teachers of students with visual impairments in order to maximize the provision of services (see, for example, South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment, 2004). Others (such as Lamb, 1997), with input from practitioners, have compiled lists of the competencies of specialist teachers. Compared to the work undertaken in North America, however, documentation is sparse in relation to what Australian teachers of students with visual impairments are required to do and what they are actually doing. These circumstances led to a research agenda to investigate the work of teachers of students with visual impairments at governmental primary and secondary schools in Queensland. Three research questions framed the study: (1) What are the roles of teachers of students with visual impairments at primary and secondary schools? (2) What activities do these teachers perform on a day-to-day basis? and (3) What challenges do these teachers face when undertaking this work?

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS

Following ethical approval from Griffith University and the Queensland Government, the first author accessed an electronic list of staff working in the area of visual impairments throughout the state, from Queensland’s Disability Services Support Unit. The data suggested that the number of

staff in the primary and secondary schools was sufficient to establish criteria to ensure that participating teachers had a strong base of knowledge and practice. Two criteria were set: (1) a teaching qualification in the area of visual impairments and (2) at least three years' experience teaching students with visual impairments. It was estimated that 20 to 25 teachers throughout Queensland would meet these criteria.

A direct field-based sampling procedure was then used to recruit interested teachers to participate. An information and consent package about the study was mailed directly to all 27 identified administrators, teachers of students with visual impairments, and advisory visiting teachers on the contact list. This recruitment process yielded a demonstrably salient group of 8 interested teachers.

Six of the eight participants were female. Of the eight, five were aged 31–45, one was younger than 30 years, and the remaining two were aged 51–60. Six of the eight reported an undergraduate qualification in visual impairments, and one had an undergraduate degree specializing in deaf-blindness. Two also had master's degrees, one in special education (hearing impairment) and one in public administration. The last teacher had a graduate degree in teaching. On average, the participants had 15 years of experience teaching students with visual impairments, with one reporting 32 years' experience. Seven participants were based in the metropolitan area of Brisbane, Queensland's capital city.

### THE INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Telephone interviews were selected to gather descriptive data from the eight participating teachers. The manner of inter-

view was chosen because of its efficiency in gathering data both from participants who are dispersed over a broad geographic area (King & Horrocks, 2010) and from a small number of participants (Porter & Lacey, 2005). In addition, interviews can produce a great deal of data within a relatively short period (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

The specific interview tool that was used in the study was generated from two sequenced activities (focus-group discussion and individual judgment) with a different group of six experienced, Brisbane-based teachers of students with visual impairments. The selection of participants for this developmental work was guided by the first author's local knowledge of experienced colleagues. In all, 16 educators were invited to participate in the activities, and 3 special education administrators, 1 secondary teacher of students with visual impairments, 1 teacher of students with visual impairments in a special school, and 1 advisory visiting teacher agreed to engage in the field-based research. During the development of the interview and subsequent pilot-testing, care was taken to ensure that the content of the items reflected Queensland's provision of services, educational contexts, and terminology of the educational system.

A telephone interview procedure, which consisted of set questions and a script for the interviewer, was used with the eight teachers of students with visual impairments to enhance the consistency of the process and the validity of the data. At the beginning of each interview, demographic information was collected from each participant. The interviewer (the first author) ensured that each inter-

view followed the same script and the sequence and wording of the interview items. The interview tool was comprised of open-ended items, fixed-response items, and ranked-response items. Open-ended response items allowed the participants to describe their teaching roles and daily practices (qualitative information) authentically. The fixed- and ranked-response items allowed the participants to define specific aspects of their roles and activity areas (quantitative information). In general, the interviews lasted 45–60 minutes.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data from the fixed- and ranked-response items were analyzed using frequency counts. The qualitative data from the open-ended response items used manual analyses to determine detailed categories of responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

### Results

The responses to four key questions from the telephone interviews captured the scope and complexity of the expected role and day-to-day practice of the participants: What does your role involve? Which specific areas do you teach? Which aspects of your role do you find difficult? What would allow you to be the best possible teacher of students with visual impairments? For the purpose of this article, the results from these key questions are reported in sequence.

#### WHAT DOES YOUR ROLE INVOLVE?

Following the introductions, the participants were initially asked to describe their current role in their own words to avoid being influenced by the content of the

other questions. The manual analysis of the reported descriptions revealed four components of the key role. Supporting students was identified as the most important responsibility, especially in terms of assisting students within general classrooms. This responsibility was followed by teaching ECC activities, collaboration with general education teachers, and access to the curriculum for students with visual impairments. The participants spoke about their role supporting students in regular classes: “mainly support for students in the regular school [and] to support teacher aides who travel with them” and “basically, we support kids who are blind and vision impaired to give them access to the programs in the high school.” They also detailed the support they provide for students via parents by “liaising throughout the year with parents.” In addition, they indicated that they provide support to regular teaching staff, for example, “helping regular teachers work out the best way to meet the needs of children with disability . . . supporting teachers—regular teachers and any teacher who does not have specific training and experience.”

The interview then moved to a preset question, with the participants asked to provide yes or no responses about activities related to their everyday role. When asked to identify professional duties from a given list, all the participants affirmed their current involvement in six of nine activity areas: ECC assessment, departmental paperwork, professional interactions, specialized professional development, dissemination of knowledge, and teaching ECC areas. In relation to the three remaining areas, all but one agreed that technological ad-

vances and funding applications and braille teaching were integral to their role. In addition, all but one agreed that the role involved providing regular curriculum support to students with visual impairments.

Next, the participants were given four broad activity areas that had previously been identified in the relevant literature: (1) collaborating and consulting with school staff, parents, and outside agencies; (2) completing paperwork requirements; (3) direct teaching; and (4) supporting students and advocating for their needs. They were asked about the frequency of performing these activities and the level of importance they placed on each activity. This question yielded a more differentiated response than did the previous one. Supporting students and advocating for their needs was ranked as the most frequently performed activity by four participants and the most important activity area by five. In comparison, two participants ranked collaborating and consulting with school staff, parents, and outside agencies as both the most frequently performed activity and the most important activity. When asked about the least frequently performed and least important activity, six of the eight participants ranked completing paperwork requirements as the activity they performed the least frequently, while all the participants ranked this activity as the least important.

### **WHICH SPECIFIC AREAS DO YOU TEACH?**

To investigate what teachers of students with visual impairments actually do (daily practice), the participants were asked to identify which of nine teaching areas in which they consistently engage

during the workweek. All confirmed that they taught across ECC areas and in specialist programs and used disability-specific equipment. All but one indicated that they taught literacy and numeracy skills, information-processing skills, and the knowledge and impact of vision conditions, and six cited teaching methods for environmental exploration, braille, and study and research skills.

When provided with the same list of teaching areas and asked to rank areas according to the “most frequently” taught and the “most important” consideration, a consensus was again evident. While two participants selected functional numeracy skills and functional literacy skills as the area taught most frequently, five of the eight ranked ECC areas as the area taught most frequently. In addition, all but one participant ranked ECC areas as important teaching areas. This high level of importance was assigned by some participants because they viewed the ECC as facilitating students’ independence: “If you teach the ECC, they are independent, and they can learn everything else; if they have the social skills that are part of that, then they are happy and can function better in the classroom.” The participants saw the ECC as promoting advocacy (“I think they’re the most efficient way to help the students help themselves”) and producing functional outcomes (“More often than not, you are able to capture other functional . . . numeracy and literacy [and] you can encapsulate that learning from doing ECC stuff”).

In answer to the question of which area was taught the “least frequently,” the responses were more differentiated: study and research skills on computers and in libraries (three participants), information

gathering about specific geographic environments through exploration and discovery methods (two participants), prebraille and braille skills (two participants), and knowledge and impact of vision conditions (one participant). Differentiated responses also were evident when specific teaching areas were ranked according to which were the least important. Of the five areas that were presented, study and research skills on computers and in libraries was reported by the greatest number of participants (three) as being the least important area taught to students. One participant believed this area was outside her role (for example, “I see my job as teaching the disability-specific technology and that the mainstream teaches the research skills”), another thought it was less important with primary school-aged students, and the remaining participant reported that it was not required with the current student population (for example, “no child who needs it at present”). Other areas that were considered the least important included follow-up and implementation of programs by specialist staff, gathering information about specific geographic environments through exploration and discovery methods, prebraille and braille skills, and knowledge and impact of vision conditions. The response from the remaining participant was discounted because multiple responses had been selected.

#### **WHICH ASPECTS OF YOUR ROLE DO YOU FIND DIFFICULT?**

The participants were also invited to describe the difficult components of their roles in their own words. Manual analyses revealed one central theme: time. Time was identified by this group

of teachers as a major difficulty for a number a reasons. The participants reflected on day-to-day limitations imposed by time restraints: “fitting enough teaching and supporting time into the day,” “factoring in the time to enable me to complete all that needs to be done to support the students,” “time—generally preparing resources to meet student[s]’ needs within subject areas when the texts are not available,” and “there is never enough time truly to devote to develop students’ conceptual understanding of what they are learning.” The participants also discussed the effect of time limitations on the support provided to students with visual impairments: “fitting enough teaching and supporting time into the day for the number of kids with fairly high needs and varying needs [and] the need for one-on-one for most of them” and “having clusters of varying groups of students; having students with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) [has an impact] on the support provided to students with [visual impairments].” The school personnel’s lack of awareness of the needs of students with visual impairments also posed difficulties for some participants.

The participants were then asked to identify challenging professional duties from a list of nine areas. All but one agreed that they found limited liaison time with teachers difficult in addition to the lack of specialized teachers. Six participants affirmed that they found it difficult having no central support or referral system, and four agreed that advocating for students, providing realistic information, and limited professional development were difficult areas associated with their role. A higher proportion of the younger participants (aged 26 to

35) found it difficult to obtain funding assistance and to interact with other professionals in the field. On the other hand, most of the older participants (aged 35 and older) reported difficulty in the areas of advocating for students, having limited liaison time with other teachers, and teaching students strategies for independence. This older and more experienced subgroup also expressed concern about the lack of specialized teachers in the area.

**WHAT WOULD ALLOW YOU TO BE THE BEST POSSIBLE TEACHER OF STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS?**

Toward the latter part of the interview, the participants were invited to discuss what would allow them to perform their roles better (ideal or best practice). Through the manual analysis, two key components were identified. The first was the need for more trained specialist staff. For example, “more . . . trained staff [and] trained teacher aides [in visual impairments]” and “more O&M teachers, probably more OTs [occupational therapists], too.” The second focused on better resources and facilities. The participants noted that “resources and equipment are our biggest need” and that their role performance would be enhanced with “time and money to access new resources.” They also thought that they would be able to carry out their daily roles better if they had access to increased professional development about assistive technology, for example, “having on-site help to learn to use technology properly [and] having people coming in [to provide in-service training] and other people working with the students in the environment.”

## **Discussion**

In the study, eight teachers of students with visual impairments in Queensland, Australia, described what they were expected to do at work (their role), explained how they went about their daily activities, and identified the challenges that are associated with performing these activities at their respective primary and secondary schools. Three important and interconnected findings can be drawn from the results. They concern role complexity, time and collaboration, and the importance of the ECC.

### **ROLE COMPLEXITY**

The results confirmed that the participants carried out a multifaceted role filled with diverse duties, consistent with teachers of students with visual impairments in other parts of the world. A key feature of the study was the participants’ agreement on the pivotal components of their professional role: providing direct support to students, advocating for students, and collaboration within and across the school community as the most important and most frequently performed activities. This finding was inconsistent with previous research in which the teachers of students with visual impairments spent most of their time teaching O&M, producing large-print materials, and ordering materials and books (Suvak, 2004). This finding has particular local implications for schools because it informs administrators and staff members about the realities of the demands placed on practicing teachers of students with visual impairments, and, in turn, should have an impact on the assignment of students to caseloads, the allocation of resources, and the allocation of time. The finding also informs Austra-



lian university educators about the diverse array of competencies required by graduates to be effective practitioners in today's schools.

### TIME AND COLLABORATION

The participants signaled that they had insufficient time to carry out their dedicated duties (see also Beamish, 2008; Klinger, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003). This disclosure may affect teachers' well-being and stress, as well as teachers' capacity to support students with visual impairments in inclusive settings. More than three-quarters of the participants reported limited liaison time with other teachers as a major difficulty of their role, even though collaboration with school staff, parents, and outside agencies is commonly viewed to be a major component of the practice of specialist teachers (Farrenkopf & McGregor, 2000; Friend, 2005; Ross & Robinson, 2000). In this study, the teachers clearly reported that the lack of time affected their capacity to perform their role best. This finding has implications for administrative and whole-school discussions about role expectations, workloads, the accountability of teachers, and the quality of instruction.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ECC

The vast majority of the participants ranked ECC areas as the specific area taught most frequently, as well as the most important area for focused teaching. Despite a number of North American studies that reported limited time spent teaching the ECC (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004; Suvak, 2004; Wolffe et al., 2002), this finding was consistent with international recommendations for best practices (Bishop, 2004; Hatlen, 1996). This find-

ing also has direct implications for the university preparation of teachers of students with visual impairments. It is essential that teachers of students with visual impairments be competent and efficient in multitasking, as well as in planning, implementing, and evaluating ECC areas, given the time constraints identified by the teachers.

### LIMITATIONS

The study was small in scale, and only interested teachers were interviewed. Therefore, the viewpoints expressed by the participants may not necessarily represent those of the majority of teachers of students with visual impairments who work in Queensland schools. Moreover, even the fine-grained, self-reported data gathered in a single interview may not have adequately captured the scope and embeddedness of these teachers' work.

### Implications for practice

The study provided a snapshot of everyday work reported by a small group of teachers of students with visual impairments in Queensland, Australia, within the context of their expected role. The findings have been disseminated at international and national conferences (Brown, 2008, 2009). They also lend weight to the call by Wasburn-Moses (2005) for additional documentation of teachers' roles and responsibilities in inclusive settings. Follow-up research, however, is warranted. At the macrolevel, for example, it would be useful to determine whether the views of the participants are representative of their counterparts in primary and secondary schools throughout the Australian states and territories. The telephone interview proce-

ture that was used in the study could be easily replicated, and subsequent findings compared and contrasted with those from this study. At the microlevel, an action research project across a small number of contextually different schools could probe more deeply into the expected role and the actual “what” and “how” of these teachers’ daily practice, in general, and with their partnering with general classroom teachers, in particular.

Although this small-scale study provided some initial insights into the demanding role and everyday practice of teachers of students with visual impairments, there is some sense of urgency to continue inquiries in this area. The scant Australian research base on the practice of specialist teachers and the dwindling number of qualified teachers of students with visual impairments in Australia (Pagliano, 2010) mean that dedicated positions for teachers of students with visual impairments to support the education of students with visual impairments in Australian schools are at risk. Generically trained special education teachers do not have the specialist knowledge, skills, or experience to replicate the everyday work carried out by teachers of students with visual impairments. The changing role and daily practice of teachers of students with visual impairments cannot be overlooked in today’s demanding educational contexts. Already, fewer Australian universities are offering teaching specializations in visual impairment, and those that do are offering fewer program options. A strong research base is needed to support the case for qualified teachers of students with visual impairments in this low-incidence, but crucially significant, area. It is imperative, therefore, that Australian

researchers work in partnership with their cross-national colleagues and teachers to document the unique and changing work of teachers of students with visual impairments.

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