

White Paper

Visual Impairment in NYC School Children

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Introduction

The importance of providing care for low vision children is recognized by many organizations, including Vision 20, Individualized Educational Programs, and The Expanding Core Curriculum. Visual impairment (VI), or vision loss, is defined by the AFB as a condition caused by eye disease, in which visual acuity is 20/70 or poorer in the better-seeing eye and cannot be corrected or improved with regular eyeglasses. According to data from the 2017 National Health Interview Survey, 26.9 million American Adults age 18 and older reported experiencing vision loss. The ACS reports that in 2017 there were 568,202 children with vision difficulty in the United States. The Centers for Disease and Control Prevention notes that (CDC) that VI is not as common in children than adults. More than half of children with vision impairment also have at least one other developmental disability, such as intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or epilepsy. Cerebral palsy is a group of disorders that affect a person's ability to move and maintain balance and posture and is the most common motor disability in children whereas epilepsy is a broad term used for a brain disorder that causes seizures.

Unless the child goes to specialized schools, it is difficult to say they are receiving the care and support they need by programs offered. The “Specialized Education in New York City: Understanding the Landscape” handbook categorizes VI in “other disabilities” section. Visual impairment is categorized as a low-incident disability and only mentions that these students should receive early intervention services or a free appropriate public education, without any specifications on their programs. It’s important to mention that the handbook that District 75 is the only district noted to serve students with low-incidence disabilities or highly specialized

needs: whereas District 1-32 serve serve students with other disabilities. While previous research on visually impaired focused on children of other countries, we will be focusing on specifically New York City children to grant them better educational services.

What causes visual impairment?

The main cause of VI in Pakistani children ages 5-16 is due to unavoidable causes such as retinal dystrophies, disorders of the central nervous system, and congenital anomalies (Tadic, et. al). Retinal dystrophies are hereditary retina abnormalities and congenital anomalies are birth defects. The researchers called for services for these children and well as inclusive education. In Ethiopia, causes of VI in children of 16 years or less was due to Vitamin A deficiency and the spread of measles (Kello and Gilbert). Improper vaccination were the major causes of severe VI and blindness of school children in the schools for the blind. Therefore VI in these children could be avoided through provision of basic primary healthcare services.

Other researchers focused on refractive errors among children in Menouf district, Egypt (Elkot, et al.) and Tanta, Egypt (Farida et al.). Individuals with refractive errors occurs when the shape of your eye does not bend light correctly, the end result being a blurred image (WHO). In the Menouf district, Elkon et al concluded that the 24% of 480 students who had refractive errors could have been due to watching television for long periods of time in dim or yellow light. The distance the children stood away from the television was also not recommended to the human eye. In Tanta, 68% of 1272 children had prevalence of refraction errors. Myopia was the most frequent error, followed by astigmatism and hypermetropia. Myopia, similar to nearsightedness, where the individual has difficulty seeing distant objects clearly. Hypermetropia is the opposite,

similar to farsightedness, and the individual cannot see close objects clearly. Astigmatism is defined as distorted vision resulting from an irregularly curved cornea, the clear covering of the eyeball. In both regions of Egypt lack of education was seen as a great factor in these refractive errors. In Tanta, most children were unaware of their refractive errors and have never received proper eye exams. Both articles mentioned that there is a call for awareness on refractive errors among children and for affordable eyecare services.

Finding the causes of VI allowed the researchers to advocate for these children and recommend a plan of action to the country's government. Varma et. al conducted a study on more than 174 000 visually impaired children aged 3 to 5 years in the United States in 2015. Of these children 121 000 (69%) arose from simple uncorrected refractive error, and 43 000 (25%) from bilateral amblyopia. Simple uncorrected refractive error is a very common eye disorder that occurs when the eye cannot clearly focus the images from the outside world (2013). Bilateral amblyopia is less common and occurs when both eyes present an unclear image to the brain. Similarly to the other articles, these researchers recommended vision screening for refractive error and related eye diseases. This may prevent a high proportion of preschool children from experiencing unnecessary VI and associated developmental delays. We believe that spreading awareness of the causes of VI in children will lead to more of these screenings. We will discuss how certain organizations can reach out to parents and educators for educational campaigns.

Department of Education

The Department of Education, DOE, claims to provide provides services designed to support equal educational opportunity and improve the academic achievement of students who

are blind, visually impaired, deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind. There are programs in place that assist these children in their educational journey. The New York City Department of Department of Education's Educational Vision Services (EVS) is specialized to assist blind and visually impaired individuals from 5 to 21 years of age, as well as eligible preschool children. Other programs, analyzed below, also contribute to these children's education. However, there are situations that programs overlook, such as social development and accessibility. Our purpose is to address specific issues these children face. We take into account concerns from parents, teachers, and the students themselves.

Situations

Studies have shown that about additional 50,000 children become blind each year adding onto the estimated 1.4 million blind children in the world. Most of the blindness in children are caused due to unavoidable causes such as hereditary, disorders in their central nervous system, and anomalies, however, these kids are able to enhance their abilities through low vision services. There are many initiatives taken towards controlling the blindness of children. One of the initiatives taken is the "Vision 20" which prioritizes the prevention and providence of care and support for avoidable blindness. Children with low vision are provided aid and rehabilitation which helps them learn to use their remaining vision as effectively as possible to improve their lives. According to the studies "One in five New York City public school children are diagnosed with a disability." There are programs and policies set in New York to help these students with the implementation of special education for kids with disabilities. Another cause of blindness in children are refractive errors, which as mentioned above, causes blurry vision.

Visually impaired children can be associated with socio-communication issues; similarly to children who aren't visually impaired that have other disabilities such as autism or other learning disabilities. Kids with VI may have a harder time communicating or socializing with others because they can't keep up with those who don't have the same barrier. Some of them also have learning disabilities along with their VI which causes another obstacle for them. It's common for kids with a VI to have a lower social ability in communicating and socializing because of it. However, the teachers and the parents can help make their learning journey accessible. These mentors can help them socialize and provide support by teaching the kids to become confident in themselves. Thus leading them to become more independent in the future. A teacher's social skills and instructional provisions can accommodate students with both VI and learning disabilities to learn in a better environment.

Visually impaired students who are going to school are dependent on the internet. Studies have shown that they are dependent on the internet and social media because it provides them a more effective way of learning. They can use these modules to discuss their daily difficulties that they face. Internet exposure is said to have more impact on students who are visually impaired because they have to depend on the media platforms to keep up with the trends. It also helps them socialize since it is harder for these kids to keep up with their peers who don't have a VI. Many institutions have provided these kids access to the internet platforms because the internet plays a vital role in their education and also helps these kids socialize without being a burden on others. The internet is beneficial to these children both educationally, and socially since it allows them to keep up with course work and connect with their peers.

Students with VIs require a lot of accommodations and services. They generally need to be accommodated with large prints or color contrasted materials. It's important to note not to provide work too explicitly different compared to their able peers. This prevents them from feeling left out, a vital source of their self-esteem. Students with VI should be applauded for their efforts yet still taught to be independent. Learning to be independent early on will teach them to do things on their own. They should be given problems to solve on their own as well as given the time to practice in order to increase the chances of success. Encouraging these students through times of difficulties and failure allows them to learn attributes of success and gain self confidence. Trained teachers should apply the suggested accommodations without doing the work for them. It's also important for teachers to apply individual adjustments for each student when necessary. Certain accommodations and services don't apply to every child. Teachers should refrain from words of discouraged and engage in open communication with the child to promote a successful learning environment.

Social Support

Peer and parents' support along with the teacher supervision are necessary for kids with visual impairment. The social support of these people can help boost their confidence. There are specialized programs helping the students who are visually impaired. There are also specialized schools for the kids with VIs. However, studies show that sending kids away to specialized schools leads to feelings of less support from their parents. Being visually impaired a lot of social support is needed. There are less chances for kids to have friends compared to their peers. Yet the friends they make are found to be very genuine and helpful in times of hardship.

Teachers are considered the most important people in the child's life as they spend most of their time with the students. Thus having a chance of providing more support. Teachers are responsible for helping these children emotionally cope with their disability in school.

Coordinating and training the teachers through specialized programs to working with kids who are visually impaired is important. It's effective when kids are supervised by the teachers but, studies conducted show that the teachers feel they needed more training. It was seen that the teachers weren't much involved with supervising the kids because they themselves knew they weren't properly trained. In order for them to be fully capable of handling kids with VIs, the para educators desired to have more information and training in the field because they believed the training they were receiving was insufficient. Parents also need specialized training because although they favor their kids participating in physical activities, they understand their disability to be a huge obstacle for them. However, the involvement of kids in physical activity would be a great thing for them. The only problem would be that these kids have difficulty learning the activity. As mentioned before, most of the kids who are visually impaired also have other disabilities. This causes hindrance for them to participate in physical activity although they and their parents are both in favor of participating in it. Even without other disabilities just being visually impaired causes obstacles for the child to participate in such activity. The parents in the studies have shown knowledge of how important participating and the benefits of it including health benefits such as maintaining one's weight. Physical activity also helps the kids psychologically and socially further reasoning their parents participation in these events. However, there are obstacles surrounding it which creates a barrier for these VI kids.

Students with visual impairment should be encouraged through social support and strong alliances. It's common for them to have feelings of rejection, but strong support allows them cope with their disability and adjust their actions to fit their environment. Although this may originally starts in the classrooms these feelings of support and independence will play a vital role in shaping their future.

Addressing the Issues

From the issues discussed above, we can ask the following; what solutions are currently being implemented towards these problems? Why do we need solutions? Solutions are needed in order to establish a set of rules that allows everyone to be on the same page. The questions to be asked are what should the city continue to do? and what should be done for more improvement? Do we need more research? The article, "Special Education in New York City: Understanding the Landscape", discusses the many programs and services that are given to school children with special needs in New York City, such as incorporating Individualized Educational Programs, IEPs, and interactive classrooms for each student that needs special education. The article also speaks of the policies that are put in place for this such as, The National Policy that with Public Law 94-142 which was established in 1975. This policy guaranteed children with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education through the use of an IEP previously mentioned. An IEP is when specialized teachers are provided to students for one-on-one learning experiences. This policy permitted the designation of a plan that allowed the IEPs to meet students needs and circumstances. The Public Law 94-142 along with the National Policy had transformed the landscape and the idea of public education for an immense number of children

with disabilities who previously were excluded from even attending public schools. As the statistics in this article show, about one in five New York public school children are diagnosed with a disability which calls for stricter programs and more aid in this particular subject for the future generations to come. Most of the kids in the 1/5 that are diagnosed with a disability, also fall into the category of underrepresented groups such as Latinos and African Americans. Of the 20% of these New York City school children, visually impaired students mark up the category of “other disabilities/ impairments” which also includes students with traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairments, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, deafness, and deaf-blindness. This broad category accounts for 3% of students who receive IEPs. Due to this limited percentage and the high price of these programs, the children with VI are not given as much attention as the other disabilities widely seen in schools. This ultimately is not helping the situation for visually impaired children and families as much as it should be.

For parents and families, disabilities such as VI in their children can always be worrisome. They want to account for their children’s safety and grant them the best education they can have. For the parents, there are various support groups such as the National Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairment (NAPVI) that give out information to parents who all have one thing in common: a child with VI. This group along with others are important for parents because it gives them the ability to associate with other parents and adults about their concerns and feelings towards their children as well as bigger topics such as the education system, the health system and many more for their children and others like them. Due to the impact that this impairment can have on children and their families, organizations such as this

one exist to continuously keep families involved, connected and aware of the networks and services that are available to them (Parents Guide, 2009).

Another Federal Law that has been implemented for the rights of services for children with disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA.) This law was passed in the year 1990 and clearly states that schools must “Serve students with disabilities in what is referred to as the least restrictive environment” (Special Education). What this act is trying to say is that students with a disability have the right to the opportunity to participate in general educational environments alongside the children who do not have a disability. In order for the general public to know if this law has been effective and will continue to be effective is through research that has been done which yielded positive results. The study showed children under this law were shown to be more social, more emotional, and have a higher academic success through the integration between students with disabilities and students without one.

Under another act called the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, a process which is called “child find” is done in order to know if children with special needs will need other services as well (Parents guide, 2009). Children with disabilities as early as birth receive a special service called early intervention services under the IDEA Part C. Part C of the IDEA provides funding to the states to give programs like Early Intervention Services to infants and children and their families. And then more information for services for individuals of the ages 3-21 can be seen in IDEA Part B.

Although the IDEA deals with these policies, it does not necessarily mention the problems that are still needing answers. Children with VI also have to learn the general core curriculum that children without a disability learn in everyday classes such as reading, writing

and math. Because a VI child has a small ability to see certain things, it can be quite challenging for them. In order to learn these subjects, these students must learn an additional set of skills to master the obstacles. Although some teachers know about these additional set of skills that visually impaired children need to learn, there is still a large quantity of teachers who are unaware. Part of the reason why is because the IDEA fails to expose it and implement it. These extra skills are placed in a category called “The Expanded Core Curriculum” (Parent Guide, 2009). This curriculum includes the ability to learn to read, write without the use of printed materials by learning how to use braille, how to move around the environment safely in a practice known as Orientation and Mobility. The use of technological devices like specialized computers are being more forcefully carried out and implemented in classrooms with visually impaired children with the world’s technological advancement. They want to teach them these tools, so they won’t be left behind. The special skills sets in the expanded core curriculum are taught by a different teacher other than the students normal teacher, who specializes in this field of work. It is important for parents of children with VI to ask their local schools if these curriculums such as the expanded core curriculum is available to them. These types of programs that give out extra skills are absolutely important for children with disabilities to be exposed to and given for their future. It is also a way for parents to be guaranteed that their children are learning more and more each day to feel as they don’t have a disability, but rather have an extra ability to do something different. Many schools who don’t provide these programs, are unaware, or are inexperienced with mainly VI. Parents must be attentive and point out the importance of understanding the impact of VI to accommodate their child’s needs. But there are also schools

that are aware and can be found through the AFB Directory of Services for Blind and Visually Impaired Persons in the United States and Canada.

As mentioned in “article name page 3” New York City School chancellors have been highlighting the need to further improve the education that is provided to students/children with disabilities and a vision where all children can feel comfortable in their school environments. From this New York has given \$33 million dollars into funding for trained clinicians and teachers for IEPs for students with disabilities. As indicated in this article on page 4

“A steady increase in the percentage of special education students served in a general education setting for 80 percent or more of the day. In the 2016-2017 school year, for instance, the NYC DOE reported that 66 percent of students with disabilities spent this much time in general education programs—up from 53 percent in 2009- 2010”

Children who are visually impaired or even blind might miss social opportunities that other children experience due to their inability to watch other children play and or to observe the behavior of their peers. Although these social opportunities can be difficult and strugglesome for these children, the parents and families have the ability to play an important and crucial role in helping them learn and participate to form relationships with others. Early intervention programs as mentioned before continue to be a reason for the flourishing environment that children with VI are being exposed to. For these reasons, it is very important and also valuable because small children with VI are able to learn through play with trained professionals by providing stimulating experiences for these kids by allowing them to learn from a young and tender age how to describe people they are around, objects that they see, and events that they participate in

them, which will help them learn about their surroundings. It is important for parents to continue encouraging their children in this way and to motivate their nature of curiosity for the environment that they live in and will continue to be around.

Teachers that have VI students in their classroom will have the access and the ability to adjust their classroom settings for the child(ren) with a VI in order to help in adapting them to the classroom settings. Some of these adjustments and modifications that are incorporated are having the children with VI have preferable seating next to the teacher during an activity such as story time so that they can see the books better. Another incorporation would be having teachers present their materials clearly to the students so that they will know what the task is and they can conduct it accordingly. Some more things that teachers who have visually impaired children in their classrooms are using is contrasting colors. These contrasting colors help them to view certain things better. The use of buddy systems is ideal so the child can have a new buddy everyday to enjoy time with, help each other out, and get to know each other. As mentioned before usage of tools like braille are incorporated as well and the usage of large prints for better seeing. These incorporations are excellent for children with VI to adjust and love their educational settings.

Interventions for Students with Visual Impairments

Visual impairments significantly affects academic performance among students and are associated with learning disabilities. Students with visual difficulties can struggle with reading accuracy, spelling, decoding, and any other activities that depend on vision. It is important for educators to consider the challenges faced by students with VIs and develop interventions to

allow them to learn competently, participate fully in daily social life, and attain optimal academic achievement. The following are some of the evidence-based interventions that can be used to improve the lives and learning abilities of students with VIs.

Prevention, treatment, and Visual Enhancement

In a study on the causes of severe VIs in Ethiopia, Kello and Gilbert (2003) report that 68% of 295 cases of visual loss were potentially avoidable. The implication of this study is that a large percentage of VIs in the developing nations are avoidable or can be treated. Citing other studies on blindness and VI in developing countries, Kello and Gilbert (2003) report that 67.2% cases of visual loss in Malawi, 56.7% in Uganda, 38.3% in South Africa, and 28.6% in Kenya could be avoided. The authors explain that vitamin A supplementation, measles immunization, and education on nutrition could significantly reduce the prevalence of visual loss in the developing nations. From such research evidence, it is imperative that the first intervention for students with visual difficulties is medical prevention or treatment of visual problems.

In addition to prevention and treatment of VI, visual enhancement is recommended for students with low vision. Shah et al. (2011) explain that many children with incurable VI can benefit from interventions to rectify low vision, hence facilitating inclusive education. In their study on low vision among 270 Pakistani children aged 4-16 years old, Shah et al. (2011) found that macular conditions and retinal diseases were the main causes of low vision among the subjects. The authors recommend that vision enhancement services such as spectacles and telescopes enhance vision and facilitate inclusive education in low vision students with

hereditary or congenital ocular anomalies (Shah et al. 2011). The use of vision enhancement interventions is henceforth crucial for the improvement of learning for students with visual loss.

Academic Accommodations

While medical interventions may enable students with VIs to participate in class and school activities, accommodations need to be made to allow them to attain optimal academic performance. Teachers and educators should design instruction to allow students with VIs to utilize their strengths to learn in and out of the classroom. General accommodations that can be used for learners with visual difficulties include use of large print materials, preferential seating in classrooms, use of color contrasts (Jones & Hensley-Maloney, 2015). Pairing of verbal and visual cues, use of dictation in learning rather than reliance on printed or handwritten material, provision of personal copies of textbooks for assistance in note taking, use of audiobooks and other materials to learn at home, use of assistive technology, and extended time offered to learners with visual difficulties such as when they sit for tests. These general accommodations are meant to make learning more inclusive to allow students with visual difficulties to learn in the same environment and learners with normal vision (Jones & Hensley-Maloney, 2015).

Instructional accommodations can also be used in schools to help students with VI to build their social skills and foster the development of perceived competence. Learners with visual loss may need explicit instructional accommodations such as designing classroom interactions that help build relationships among all students despite their physical and visual abilities. Students with visual loss may be unable to fully immerse in classroom activities that build social relationships between children, and instructors may need to step in to facilitate

socialization as well as learning. For example, teachers can explicitly instruct children to always shake hands and communicate as well as teach them on how to use non-verbal communication to express themselves. Teachers can also ensure that students with visual difficulties sit in well-lit, low-traffic areas in school activities so that they can have enhanced vision for interaction and to reduce the risk of negative interactions such as bumping into each other in overcrowded rooms. Some of these interventions may be simplistic, but they are important in ensuring proper social development. Students with visual difficulties also require parental support to show them that they are capable. Teachers also need to teach them how to be less dependent on others and support them to build independence and self-determination skills that will help them in learning as well as in the society.

Use of Electronic Media

The use of electronic media is an effective intervention that can improve the lives and learning abilities of students with VIs. Electronic media facilitates entertainment, can reduce loneliness, enable students to build confidence, create awareness about societal and cultural problems, and allow individuals with VIs to stay in touch with current affairs, trends, politics, and news. Electronic media made for students with low vision or visual difficulties can make learning and interaction easier for them (Ranjha, Qurat, & Rofi, 2015). Such media can also be integrated to classroom learning to support knowledge acquisition and memory retention (Jones & Hensley-Maloney, 2015).

Conclusively, learners with visual difficulties can be supported in a variety of ways including prevention and treatment of visual problems, use of visual enhancement products and

services, implementation of academic accommodations and designing of school environments to promote inclusivity and socialization, and the use of electronic media to support learning and social development. These interventions for students with VIs can be applied together to support learning and help the affected individuals lead normal lives.

Conclusion

Visual impairment is an issue that is caused by eye diseases, nervous system disorders, improper vaccination, and retinal dystrophies. Despite the many challenges that children experiencing this problem encounter, the education department has undertaken measures that ensure that they are accessing education opportunities with ease. “Vision 20” provides services that work towards managing the causes of avoidable blindness. Social media sites and the internet offers suitable tools that the visually impaired persons can use to learn. They manage to understand the trending issues and provide a platform to socialize, considering that it is difficult for them to keep up with people that are not visually blind when they are communicating. Social support programs and laws have been implemented that ensures that persons with this disability manage to have a conducive environment to learn and undertake other activities in their lives.

Recommendations

Organizations should ensure that the adopted preventive measures that will ensure that a population is not encountering cases of visual impairment. The vision enhancement services for sick patients can be introduced with telescopes and spectacles being critical in support the ailment effects. Medical intervention alone may not be enough for students, and they should be provided with accommodation to ensure that they manage to realize optimal academic

performance. The learning institutions can pair the visual cues and dictation with the verbal elements rather than relying on the utilization of the printed or handwritten materials.

Organizations should increase the use of electronic media that helps to increase their ability to build confidence, lower the occurrence of loneliness issues, enable them to understand the current affairs, and sensitize the public about the social and cultural problems. When all these measures are followed, there is a high likelihood that the visually impaired persons will have an easy time undertaking their various activities, such as learning and manage to realize their goals in life.

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