

Facilitating the Inclusion of Children With Vision Impairment: Perspectives of Itinerant Support Teachers

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Children with vision impairment (VI) and blindness are largely educated in mainstream schools in Australia. Specialist itinerant support teachers – vision (ISTVs) travel from school to school to facilitate the education of these children. The purposes of this study were to examine the barriers that ISTVs face in this role, and to identify strategies used to address these barriers. Seven ISTVs participated in the study. Focus group interviews were conducted to collect data from participants. Constant comparison, a form of thematic analysis, was used to examine the data. Results indicate that barriers include a lack of understanding among regular school educators of the needs of children with VI, lack of awareness of the role of ISTVs, insufficient resources and time, and inadequate training. Frequent communication and good working relationships with staff help to minimise or negate many of the potential barriers. However, barriers such as lack of time and inadequate training remain unaddressed and require the attention of policymakers at higher levels.

Keywords: itinerant teachers, vision impairment, barriers, strategies, inclusion

Since the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) called upon governments around the world to adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, many countries have produced legislation supporting inclusion and an increasing number of children with disabilities are attending mainstream schools. Inclusion requires mainstream classroom teachers to effectively teach diverse groups of children. The use of inclusive teaching practices enables teachers to educate a large number of children with disabilities. Children with vision impairment (VI) and blindness, however, present a particular challenge because most teaching practices are designed for children who can see. In addition, children with VI require specialist assessment and explicit instruction in disability specific skills (National Disability Services and Australian Blindness Forum [NDS & ABF], 2008) that regular classroom teachers are often not trained to deliver (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004; Olmstead, 2005).

Children with VI need to learn a large number of specific skills. These include orientation and mobility (O&M), Braille and technology. They also need to learn

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skills other children learn through casual observation; for example, social and independent living skills. The need for children with VI to learn these skills has led to the development of a specific curriculum: the Expanded Core Curriculum for Blind and VI Children and Youths (ECC; American Foundation for the Blind [AFB], 2010). Competence must be gained in all areas of the ECC if children with VI are to live happy and fulfilling lives in the community (Hatlen, 1996). Many countries that have legislation supporting inclusion (e.g., the United States of America, Canada, and the United Kingdom) provide a continuum of service of delivery for children with VI in an attempt to address their complex learning needs. Services include residential colleges and specialist day schools, resource rooms, distance education and education within mainstream schools with support from itinerant (otherwise known as visiting) support teachers – vision (ISTVs; N. Shaheen, personal communication, October 26, 2010). This continuum of educational delivery may be necessary for some students because independent living skills cannot be appropriately taught in classroom settings (Wolffe et al., 2002).

In Australia, the vast majority of the estimated 3000 students with vision impairment and blindness (NDS & ABF, 2008) attend mainstream schools. South Australia provides one specialised ‘school for the blind’ (Whitehead, 2010) but other states and territories rely almost solely on ISTVs (Whitehead, 2010) to deliver the ECC and facilitate the inclusion of children with VI in mainstream schools (Eriks-Brophy et al., 2006).

It is estimated that Victoria, where this research was conducted, has approximately 1100 children who qualify for ISTV assistance (J. Keffe, personal communication, August 20, 2008). In Victoria, the last special school for children with VI closed in 2008 (Perkins, 2009). Parents of the students who attended the school believe that their children’s needs cannot be adequately met in a mainstream school and are concerned that they are falling behind in Braille literacy and other blindness-specific skills (Whitehead, 2010). The ABF is concerned that in Australia, many young people with VI are completing school with inadequate skills to look after themselves, pursue further education, seek employment or actively participate in society (NDS & ABF, 2008). There appears to be a growing disconnect between legislation such as the Education Standards of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) that require schools to make adaptations that enable students with disabilities to participate in school programs, and the reality experienced by many students with VI.

ISTVs (or visiting teachers in Victoria) and classroom teachers are pivotal to the implementation of inclusive educational programs in Victoria. For programs to be effective, mainstream teachers and ISTVs must work as a team; the classroom teacher accepts prime responsibility for the student’s education (Hudson, 1997) and the ISTV offers specialist support (Sharma et al., 2010).

ISTVs travel from school to school consulting with teachers and parents of children with VI and providing individual instruction and learning resources to students (Dinnebeil, McNerney, & Hale, 2006; Olmstead, 2005). ISTVs conduct assessments to identify their students’ learning needs and work with the educational team to set personal and academic goals for the student, and ensure these goals are achieved. ISTVs assist parents and teachers to understand the social and educational implications of a child’s VI. They work with the teacher to understand the child’s educational needs that are related to his or her VI and make appropriate curricular modifications. ISTVs also either assist the teacher to adapt classroom materials or complete adaptations

themselves. The adaptations may include enlarging texts or transcribing text into Braille (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004; Olmstead, 1995; Seitz, 1994; Suvak, 2004).

Since ISTVs fulfill an essential role in the inclusion of children with VI, the barriers they face in adequately performing their roles must be identified and addressed. Very little is known about the barriers that ISTVs face even though the itinerant model of educating students with vision impairment has been practised for many years in Australia (Sharma et al., 2010).

Based on the limited research available, it appears that challenges faced by ISTVs in Australia include driving vast distances, up to 500 km in one day (Douglas, 1989); working with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who speak little or no English (Gallimore, 2005); and working with classroom teachers, who may have limited understanding about the necessity and value of children with VI learning the ECC (Palmer, 2005). Research conducted in the United States found that challenges faced by itinerant teachers of children who are deaf are similar to those experienced by ISTVs (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004). Hyde and Power (2004) surveyed 143 itinerant teachers of students with hearing impairment in New South Wales (NSW). Major challenges identified by these teachers included heavy workload, the inordinate time spent driving and difficulty scheduling time to visit classroom teachers. The vast majority (85%) of these itinerant teachers reported such difficulties as finding a suitable place to work with students within the school building and not being informed of events or school schedule changes (e.g., sports days).

Some of these constraints were also reported by Correa-Torres and Howell (2004) who conducted interviews with 23 ISTVs in the United States. These teachers reported time constraints as a major problem resulting from large caseloads and disproportionate paperwork. This was further exacerbated by changes to state policies. Study participants reported that the range of professional skills required of them, including technology, was so vast that they had difficulty keeping their skills up to date. Another reported difficulty was classroom teachers who changed lesson plans without notice, which resulted in ISTVs having inadequate time to prepare resources for their students. Many participants reported working 'additional hours, taking work home and conducting business by phone or email in their own time' (p. 430). Participant ISTVs stated that they are required to be flexible, creative, and successful communicators to address some of the problems (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004). Participants stipulated that the skill of listening was vital to identifying the needs of students, classroom teachers and families. ISTVs thought that trainee teachers need as much practical experience as possible, to observe and work with experienced itinerant teachers, and that they should be taught skills of effective teamwork, including collaboration, communication and the way in which to be part of a collaborative team. ISTVs emphasised that university lecturers should spend time in mainstream classrooms to keep in touch with the current educational environment.

Sharma et al. (2010) interviewed an ISTV and a mainstream classroom teacher in NSW to understand the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to address the challenges of including students with VI in a regular school. The ISTV reported that challenges included lack of time and excessive paperwork, excessive driving, working with classroom teachers who do not plan ahead, adapting to different school cultures, and keeping up-to-date with technology. This ISTV stated that itinerant teachers must be flexible, adaptable and good communicators, and spend time interacting with school staff. Sharma et al.'s study (2010) was limited to the views of two exemplary teachers

who worked successfully together in a mainstream school. The present study reports on barriers reported by ISTVs in Victoria, and strategies used to address these barriers.

Method

Research Design

A qualitative research design based on focus group interviews was used. Focus groups are useful for conducting initial research into an area of interest (Gerber & Smith, 2006) for several reasons. Participants in focus groups share ideas from personal experience (Powell & Single, 1996) and explore issues of common importance (Breen, 2006). The group interaction generates rich data and such insights as feelings, beliefs, reactions and experiences that would be unavailable by other research methods (Morgan, 1997). These data can help identify issues that the participants consider important, and therefore further areas of inquiry (Powell & Single, 1996). Focus groups also allow vast amounts of information to be collected in a short period of time (Morgan, 1997) and are particularly useful for understanding the perspectives of a specific population (Gerber & Smith, 2006).

Participants

Seven ISTVs who worked in metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria, participated in this study. Six ISTVs worked in the government sector, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2008; three in the Southern Metropolitan Region and three in the Eastern Metropolitan Region) and one worked with the Catholic sector, the Catholic Education Office (CEO). Participants were Caucasian females whose ages ranged from 45 to 62 years, with a mean age of 54 years. ISTVs had between 18 and 40 years' teaching experience, most of which was as mainstream classroom teachers in government primary schools. Employment as ISTVs ranged from 18 months to 27 years, averaging 10 years. Six of the seven participants had taught in special settings or 'schools for the blind'. Four ISTVs held graduate diplomas, one held a bachelor degree and two held master's degrees in special education. Only three of the participants specified that they had majored in vision impairment.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this research was obtained from Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans and from research officers at the DEECD and CEO. ISTVs from the DEECD and CEO were identified using web searches and telephone calls.

ISTVs in the DEECD were contacted via regional offices and ISTV stream leaders (senior ISTVs). Contact details of the four metropolitan regional offices were obtained from the DEECD website. Each regional office was telephoned to find out how to contact ISTVs who worked in that region. Telephone numbers for ISTV stream leaders were then obtained from regional welfare offices. Stream leaders were contacted by telephone to inform them of the study and to request their postal details so that information about the study could be sent to them. Stream leaders in the Eastern, Western and Southern Metropolitan areas provided their contact details. Packages containing information about the study, invitations to participate, consent forms and copies of a questionnaire were sent to each stream leader. Stream leaders then disseminated this information to ISTVs. In all, 15 invitations were sent to ISTVs who worked for the DEECD. Six ISTVs agreed to participate.

In order to contact ISTVs in the CEO, a search for ‘Visiting Teacher Service’ was made on the CEO website. This search led to the Student Services page that contains links to the regional offices and contact details for the regional managers. Regional managers were contacted by telephone and were asked to provide contact details for ISTVs who worked in the region. Three ISTVs who worked in metropolitan Melbourne were identified. Packages containing an information letter, an invitation to participate, a consent form and a questionnaire were posted to the three ISTVs. One ISTV agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Data were primarily collected through two focus group interviews composed of participants from Eastern Metropolitan Region and Southern Metropolitan Region, respectively, and a semistructured interview with the participant from the CEO. Krueger (1994) and Morgan (1997) recommend a minimum of two focus groups be conducted to ensure that data are not idiosyncratic to a particular group. Participants filled in a questionnaire prior to the interviews. The focus group interviews, semistructured interview and questionnaire contained identical questions. The written comments on the questionnaire allowed for triangulation of the data (Krueger, 1994) and limited the effect of participant bias in the focus groups (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The questionnaire also enabled participants to mentally prepare for the focus group discussion (Eriks-Brophy et al., 2006).

Focus group questions were adapted from those used in previous research conducted with ISTVs (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004) and itinerant teachers of students with hearing impairment (Luckner & Howell, 2002; Yarger & Luckner, 1999; see Table 1). In addition to providing responses to focus group questions, the participants in the first focus group were asked to comment on the focus group questions to ensure they were clear and covered areas ISTVs thought important (Breen, 2006; Eriks-Brophy et al.,

TABLE 1
Focus Group Questions

Introductory question:
 What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the term ‘visiting teacher’?

Transition questions:
 List five+ characteristics of a successful visiting teacher.
 Which, if any, do you consider most important?
 Think back to when you began working as a visiting teacher. What attracted you to the position?
 What aspects of your job do you find enjoyable? Please give some examples.
 Which aspects are least enjoyable?

Key questions:
 What skills do visiting teachers need? Give examples of how you have used these skills.
 What is the most important part of your job?
 What part of your job has the most impact on students/teachers/school community? Give an example.
 Are there any barriers that interfere with you being as effective as you would like to be? What?
 Do you have any suggestions for future teachers?
 Did your university training program adequately prepare you to fulfill your roles/perform the necessary day-to-day responsibilities?
 What suggestions would you make to improve teaching training for visiting teachers?

Note: More questions were asked in the original research. This paper presents information only about barriers.

2006). Some changes were made to the wording of focus group questions based on the feedback received in the first discussion.

Focus group interviews and the semistructured interview were recorded by audiotape and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Written summaries of each interview transcript were sent to participants via email to ensure the content accurately reflected their views (Krueger, 1994).

Data Analysis

The authors read interview transcripts to identify data that addressed the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The ‘constant comparison method’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to code the data and to group the codes into categories and themes (Lichtman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2002). Using this method, researchers assign codes to relevant ideas to reduce the data and to aid comparison. Codes are then grouped into categories. In this study, for example, the codes ‘teacher unaware of ECC’, ‘teacher expects ISTV to act as subject tutor’ and ‘explanation of role of ISTV’ were placed under the category, ‘Role of ISTV’. Following the development of categories, an outside observer was informed of the research questions and independently identified categories (Leatherman & Niemeier, 2005). The authors agreed on the most pertinent categories for the research questions within the current educational context (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

Questionnaire responses were analysed separately and categories obtained were crosschecked with those from the transcript analysis. The transcript analysis was also compared to the verified transcription summary within each group to ensure the analysis reflected participant views. Analyses of the three interviews were compared with each other and redundancies removed.

Results

Analysis revealed three major categories of barriers to effective service delivery. These categories are:

- barriers encountered when working with regular school educators,
- systemic barriers, and
- inadequate generalist and specialist teacher training.

Strategies that the participants use to address these barriers are also reported.

Barriers Encountered when Working with Regular School Educators

Lack of Knowledge of the Roles of ISTVs

All of the participants claimed to have encountered educational staff — principals, classroom teachers and teacher aides — who did not understand the supporting role of ISTVs and who had negative attitudes towards children with VI. The participants stated that some teachers do not teach in an inclusive manner and believe that children with VI should attend schools for the blind. They reported that educational personnel made comments such as, ‘Why isn’t he in a school for the blind?’ and ‘Aren’t there schools for these people?’

All participants agreed that most teachers wanted to help but high expectations placed on teachers and time constraints meant that they did not attend to the ISTV’s advice. One participant pointed out that some teachers transferred the responsibility for a child’s education to a teacher aide.

A recurring theme was that teachers and principals did not know about the role of ISTVs, nor did they know enough about the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). Three participants reported that a minority of teachers expected them to act as subject tutors. One ISTV noted that a maths teacher had declined the offer of a tutor for a student with VI because she thought the ISTV would act in that role. Conversely, this ISTV reported, some classroom teachers expected ISTVs to be expert in every area related to VI.

All participants reported that they have to consistently explain their role to classroom teachers. Most participants agreed that clear explanations of their supportive role, their expertise, and the importance of the ECC for students help teachers to understand the role of the ISTV and reduce negativity. Participants agreed that listening to and addressing teacher concerns early in the year reduced teacher anxiety. They believed that trust and a relationship can be developed from the first meeting between ISTV and classroom teacher. This trust helps the teacher to work collaboratively with the ISTV and to request help if problems arise.

Inappropriate Expectations of Parents, Teacher Aides and Teachers

A persistent theme of the discussions was that parents, teacher aides and teachers frequently provide inappropriate assistance to children with VI. ISTVs reported that they work towards developing independence in their students. However, parents, teacher aides and teachers reduced students' autonomy by performing many tasks for them.

Five ISTVs reported that some parents were very busy and did not provide their children the opportunities to develop skills. Other parents kept their children home from school to protect them from being teased. Some parents expected their children to be taught skills that did not address their individual needs; for example, a child with VI and intellectual disability was making progress learning to read large print, yet her mother thought that the child should be learning Braille.

Three participants emphasised that parents need to be frequently reminded to give their children the time and responsibility to be independent. Participants reported listening and responding to parents' concerns. Participants agreed that communicating with parents was important to ensure parents' concerns were addressed. One ISTV gave an example of how she invited a mother to a meeting in which she could observe her daughter reading print. Four participants stated that they used a communication diary to exchange information with parents.

Five participants reported that teachers and teacher aides frequently do too much for their students. One participant recounted, '[Teacher aides] set up their reading stands for them, they pick up pencils off the floor for them and they sit next to them'. Another participant related an anecdote about a Year 9 boy who should have been working independently:

The [boy's] aide had been reading everything off the board, telling the boy what was on the sheets; the boy was dictating any notes that he had to the aide, who was then writing them down and then handing them in.

The participants related the ways in which mainstream teachers sometimes hinder the development of independence in students by interfering with students' workspace or belongings. One participant reported ways in which staff continually rearranged the belongings of one student, which meant he could never find anything.

All participants agreed they instruct teachers and teacher aides to do as little as possible for their students. This is characterised by the response of one participant who said, 'We

tell the aide that her role is to prepare materials and to be a support to the classroom teacher'. When mainstream teachers and teacher aides follow this advice, the students learn to be more independent and staff learn ways to best support their students.

Systemic Barriers

Lack of resources, including inadequate educational materials and limited time, were repeated themes in the discussions.

Inadequate Educational Resources

The ISTVs reported that specialised equipment, general educational resources and teacher aides can be difficult to obtain. Resources for people with VI, for example, computer software programs like JAWS for Windows screen reading software, can be prohibitively expensive or not readily available. One participant reported that, on occasion, students may not obtain resources because the funding provided by DEECD is spent without consulting either the student or the ISTV working with that student. One ISTV reported an example of how funding had been spent on a software dictionary that the student already owned.

One ISTV thought that if schools focus on student needs and programs to meet those needs, and set aside the time for educational teams to consult and problem-solve, the school will work out how to meet students' needs. The ISTV reported that educational team meetings are a priority in the schools in which she works. In this ISTV's experience, teams, in consultation with the student, always developed appropriate solutions regardless of limited funding.

All participants noted that prescribed texts can be difficult to obtain in accessible format for students with VI. Students need to read well ahead of time to be able to keep up with class work. One ISTV stated that obtaining books in an accessible format is a battle against time because teachers may not know what books they are going to use for the following year and it takes time to obtain permission for the student to receive books in e-text or Braille. However, this ISTV admitted that the advent of e-text has made accessing books much quicker as books no longer need to be transcribed into Braille.

Every participant agreed that many students do not have enough teacher aide time for supervised practice of ECC skills. Two participants said that sometimes teacher aides who are allocated to other students in the classroom can supervise equipment practice and prepare materials when their own student is receiving direct instruction from the teacher or is engaged with peers.

Insufficient Time

Each participant identified lack of time to fulfill their roles effectively. ISTVs did not always get the opportunity to discuss their students with teachers or to attend educational team meetings. One participant explained that time limitations of teachers are most difficult in secondary schools: 'Secondary schools are hopeless ... it's totally impossible for me ... to see all the subject teachers.' The ISTV said that she addresses this problem by establishing a contact person. ISTVs prefer a staff member from the school to be the contact person, but in some cases it can be a student's parents.

Each participant viewed the inability to attend educational team meetings as a major problem. One participant pointed out that if the ISTV is not present at the meeting, then vision-related and ECC goals are unlikely to be discussed. Another emphasised that sometimes something important might be raised that the ISTV might otherwise not

find out about. At least one of the participants viewed educational team meetings so highly that she attended them in her own time.

All participants agreed that administrative duties and travel requirements are time-consuming. ISTVs reported that they often attend to administrative duties in their own time, which allows them to spend more time with students and teachers. Travelling between schools can be stressful when ISTVs encounter bad weather and roadwork. However, many of the participants use this time to organise their thoughts about the students that they are visiting.

Inadequate Generalist and Specialist Teacher Training

All participants concurred that widespread lack of knowledge about the roles of ISTVs and inappropriate use of teacher aides was indicative of insufficient or inappropriate training of mainstream classroom teachers. ISTVs suggested training in inclusive practices could be integrated into generalist education courses in one of two main ways: integrated within each learning unit or subject area or in separate compulsory special education subjects. One participant proposed that education students develop a folder of inclusive teaching practices, specialist teaching positions and contact details of relevant organisations. This information would empower new teachers to obtain appropriate support when they have their own students with disabilities. Three participants volunteered that ISTVs were happy to deliver lectures or hold workshops for undergraduate teachers if necessary.

Each participant expressed concern that there is no training course in Victoria for ISTVs. Five participants in this study commenced working as an ISTV without specialist training. One participant has since obtained training and views it as imperative, saying ISTVs without training 'don't know what [they] don't know'. For example, ISTVs who have not had formal training may not understand reasons why Braille is taught, or the methods of teaching it, and may rely on prescriptive methods. The four participants who had not received specialist university training in vision managed their roles due to the support of the more experienced and highly trained ISTVs and the support offered by the Statewide Vision Resource Centre (SVRC). The SVRC is a government-funded centre that supports the education of children with VI in Victoria. One participant likened the SVRC to '... instant knowledge any time down the phone'. The answer to any question 'is here at the Resource Centre or the answer to where you can find the answer is here'. An ISTV, who had received formal training, commented that having someplace like SVRC that '... I can ring up and go this is what happened, and talk it through with somebody else who's been in the same position [can be] very powerful'. The ISTVs who work in the Eastern Metropolitan Region are based at the SVRC and value the opportunities this brings. One said:

You have the opportunities to build relationships ... because you work in a tight little unit ... It's a fantastic place to come back to and to debrief, because ... we don't have a debrief in a school ... having that support's been invaluable. ... I couldn't survive without them.

All participants commented they frequently phone staff at the SVRC to discuss professional issues and attend the professional development activities it provides four times a year. Three participants agreed that although a local university and the SVRC offer individual units on VI, there is a need for a specialist university course for ISTVs in Victoria. Two participants reported they encourage quality teachers to consider the ISTV role, but are concerned that limited incentives and opportunities exist for teachers to train to become ISTVs.

Discussion

In this study, practising ISTVs who work in metropolitan Victoria, Australia, presented their perspectives on the barriers that interfere with their work of facilitating the education of children with VI. Most pertinent findings of this study were that:

1. most mainstream educators do not know about, nor understand the role of, ISTVs
2. most mainstream classroom teachers do not know the ways in which to work with ISTVs
3. ISTVs do not have adequate time to perform their roles effectively
4. there is inadequate specialist training for teachers of children with VI in Victoria.

Many regular school educators are unaware of, or have limited knowledge about the roles performed by ISTVs. This has major implications for the education of children with VI. Schools in Australia are required by law to make provision for children with VI so they may participate in educational programs (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing, 2006; State Government of Victoria, 2006). For schools to fulfill this requirement, mainstream classroom teachers need to consult and collaborate with ISTVs. In the United States, an ISTV is required to be a member of the child's educational team (AFB, 2005). However, although the Disability Standards for Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005) stipulates that 'appropriately trained support staff, such as specialist teachers ... [be] made available to students with disabilities' (p. 30), the standards do not elaborate that children with VI must therefore have an ISTV within their educational team. Even if this were the case, contact details and information about ISTVs are not easily accessible. Therefore, schools are required to provide for students with VI, yet the information and support that schools need to do so is not readily available. Further, provision of suitable accommodations by schools is not enforced. As a result, ISTVs may not be aware of students with VI until they are in their final years of school when schools apply for special consideration for final exams. Not knowing of students with VI is of great concern to ISTVs because the students are not given the opportunity to learn the skills mandated by the ECC that are essential for children with VI to live meaningful, independent and productive lives as part of the wider community (NDS & ABE, 2008).

The ISTVs who participated in this study found that when they received an invitation to work with students with VI in schools, many teachers did not understand the ISTV role, nor the importance of the ECC for the education of children with VI (Palmer, 2005). Some teachers transferred the responsibility for their students' education to untrained teacher aides and some school staff provided unnecessary assistance to students (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Griffin-Shirley & Matlock, 2004). Unnecessary help provided to students with VI may cause them to develop learned helplessness (Giangreco et al., 1997; Griffin-Shirley & Matlock, 2004). Hence, in addition to their core role of facilitating the education of students with vision impairment, ISTVs find themselves explaining the importance of the ECC to teachers (Palmer, 2005), addressing teacher concerns, strongly advocating for their students to learn the ECC, and training teachers and teacher aides to expect students to display initiative and to be as independent as possible. The time ISTVs spend giving explanations to teachers reduces the time ISTVs can spend on their core work: addressing areas of the ECC and instructing teacher aides in ways to practise ECC skills with their students (Dinnebeil et al., 2006). Time ISTVs spent training teacher aides and teachers in ways to manage their students could be reduced if undergraduate education

courses included information about educating students with disabilities, roles of specialist staff and ways in which mainstream teachers can work with specialist teachers and parents.

Limited time is a major problem for ISTVs in Victoria, as it is for ISTVs in other countries (Correa-Torres & Howell, 2004; Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004; Olmstead, 1995; Seitz, 1994). In Victoria, the DEECD employs just over 20 ISTVs to serve approximately 500 children, their families and teachers (Robinson, 2010; M. Tainsh, personal communication, October 25, 2010), under half of the estimated number of children in Victoria who qualify for ISTV support. Case loads of Victorian ISTVs average more than 20 children; well in excess of the eight recommended in the United States (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004). Large case load size necessarily means less time per student and more time driving. This study found that lack of time prevented ISTVs' attendance at educational team meetings. As a result, ISTVs might not receive important information and may not be perceived as being important to the educational team. ISTVs lose the opportunity to discuss the implications of the student's VI, to explain the importance of the ECC to the educational team and advocate for the inclusion of vision-related educational goals in the student's educational program. Hence the absence of the ISTV from meetings can have long-term negative ramifications for a child's education (Hatlen, 1996).

Specific qualifications are not legally required for people to work as ISTVs in Victoria (Hobson, 2008). Given the complexity of the ISTV role and the unique educational needs of children with VI, it is surprising that ISTVs are not required to have a specialist qualification. Only three of the participants had formal qualifications in the education of children with VI. The remaining four ISTVs learnt on the job and through professional development offered by the SVRC. Many fully trained ISTVs are nearing retirement age and will not be available to support less experienced ISTVs. Therefore, a specialist postgraduate university course for teachers of children with VI within Victoria is essential if these students are to receive an adequate education.

Limitations

Despite our best efforts we could only recruit seven ISTVs and the perspectives of those participants were presented in this study. As the number of ISTVs in the state of Victoria is less than 20, it could be argued that the views expressed by them represent approximately half of the population of ISTVs and are a reasonable representation of their collective views.

The study was also limited by the shortcomings intrinsic to focus groups. For example, the researcher only has access to data that participants choose to disclose, participants are limited to those who can attend the focus group time and location, and certain participants could influence what other participants stated (participant bias; Morgan, 1997). We attempted to address this limitation by asking participants to complete a questionnaire prior to coming for the interviews.

Further Research

Further research is required to investigate whether or not the experiences and views of participants are typical of a larger ISTV population in Victoria as well as in other states and territories.

The lack of awareness about the ISTV role indicates that research into the perspectives of classroom teachers and school principals on the education of children

with VI is needed. The perspectives of parents, students and ex-students about their education, the role of ISTVs and what attributes and skills enable ISTVs and classroom teachers to do their job well could yield important information for teacher training and the planning and implementation of educational policy for children with VI.

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