I am an experienced teacher who has worked with pupils with a severe visual impairment for many years. My concerns focus on the reduction of qualified teacher support for these young people, which has occurred over the last five years. Those with a visual impairment require a specific curriculum and cannot be ‘lumped into’ a group who appear to be known as additional support in most schools.

“The success of children with a visual impairment in mainstream schools is heavily dependent upon the quality of support that is available to them.” (Visual Impairment Access to Education for Children and Young People)

Where is this support now? Qualified Teachers of Visually Impaired Pupils are no longer being trained in most authorities due to cost cutting exercises, which in my view are short sighted (excuse the pun). There is an ill judged opinion that anyone and everyone can support severely visually impaired pupils. After all, management in schools is fond of the phrase that every teacher is responsible for every child in his/her classroom. In theory, this is admirable and cheap because only one teacher is required. It also appeals to the vanity of the teaching profession who feel bolstered up with this compliment. But if the key aim is to enable all visually impaired pupils to maximise their vision to access the curriculum how does a class teacher, responsible for 30 pupils, know and understand the visually impaired child; remain conscious of the learning environment and organise the materials to present them with.

Who provides the correct size of large print materials?
Who teaches Braille to those who require to learn?
Who checks and corrects the Braille materials?
Who organises and adapts materials from diagrams, maths, and sciences?
Who interprets diagrams and turns them into raised diagrams to enable a visually impaired person to read the information and understand it?

I know what the answer will be from all those who are following the road of simply placing subject teachers, pupil support teachers and managers to organise the support of visually impaired pupils.

**Technology**: iPads, Talking technology, Video Magnifiers where the camera allows the visually impaired child to sit at the back of the class and see the teacher and board clearly. Great! The initial outlay may be expensive but the managers crow it is cheaper in the long term and you only need an Assistant of Special Needs to carry it in. But what if the child does not understand the task. What if copying is too much?

**Braille**: Recent discussions about Braille mentioned that pupils should learn it when they can only read font size 48. This is unworkable. Have you tried to print out notes at **size 48**? How difficult does learning have to be? How disheartening would this be if you were trying to study for a number of subjects? Font size 36 should be the point where Braille becomes a method of communication. Yes, it is possible to use talking text but words and language need to be felt and read if a visually impaired person is to communicate with meaning. Braille is essential. It allows individuals to read and work when technology breaks down. It allows pupils
to participate in lessons, offer ideas through writing and discussion. It allows a blind person an equal voice in the classroom, in the school and in society. It is part of the package of learning. For both visually impaired and severely visually impaired children and young people it is essential that they comprehend what they have seen or are reading so that they can commit this knowledge to memory to extend their comprehension of the world.

Do you know that 80% of learning is triggered by vision? Lots of learning is incidental. How can a camera provide this kind of learning on its own? Children and teenagers need to learn via other senses such as talking, listening. Visual information needs to be presented with clarity and strong contrast if the learner is to receive the information at the same time as everyone else. That means they need a teacher who understands the subject and has the experience to explain the teaching points in a different way the child can understand. The visually impaired child may not look visually impaired and people who do not understand visual needs may not realise the child cannot comprehend the lesson because they have missed seeing key points. An example of this is the fact that many children are poor spellers because they missed ‘seeing’ letters or phonics because of the pace of learning or they were not identified as being visually impaired early enough to change teaching strategies and make adaptations to teaching and learning.

**Mobility and orientation/ Health and Well Being**

**How does a visually impaired pupils get around a new place or negotiate a new environment?**

They need to avoid obstacles. They need to learn routes around the environment of their home, school and in the school if they are to become independent. Independence and self-confidence are the key to success. Links with mobility officers who can teach the pupils these daily living skills is great but qualified teaching staff is essential to ensure that these instructions are reinforced. Pupils should be allowed to walk to classes independently with peers (earlier than others to avoid school traffic). They do not need to be guarded or supervised by an ASN at all times in the quest to comply with Health and Safety Measures. Self-esteem only grows with each personal success, however minor, such as walking with a friend and socialising. With the wrong advice or untrained personnel this is not allowed. Daily living skills and mobility should be essential areas of the visually impaired curriculum yet they are being pushed out because of a lack of understanding by non-visually impaired teachers and management.

Visually impaired pupils need to learn how to be safe, how to cook, how to wash clothes and personal hygiene. Their needs are different especially if they come from homes where this level of support cannot be offered for various reasons. Again the pupils need time to talk and discuss these skills with people who understand the difficulties they face. The understanding comes from training, experience and day-to-day working with visually impaired people. Yet this knowledge has been downgraded and pupils participate in class lessons where class teachers do not have the time to set aside to work with individuals. The visually impaired pupils lose out again.
All pupils should be educated to be prepared for life. They require confidence and resilience and good mental health. Yet visually impaired pupils have to encounter a problem before it is tackled in mainstream schools nowadays. Whereas before, the teacher of visual impairment worked with the pupils consistently and constantly thereby developing a strong relationship of trust, nowadays the pupils are supported by a variety of individuals: supply teacher one day, ASN the next, cover teacher and maybe as an afterthought a teacher of visual impairment one day. No relationship. Why is this crucial? The teenage years are well documented as emotional and stormy. What if you cannot see what you look like in a society, which judges by appearance? Who do you talk to? Who do you talk to about the emotional and physical worries about personal care and relationships? The Pupil Support teacher? In charge of maybe 40-50 sighted pupils. Therein lies the rub.

Visually impaired pupils need teachers of visual impairment and it costs more to provide this but we must invest in our future and if our future has severely visually impaired people then it must happen. They need to be advised by those who understand their specific needs to choose those subjects, which will enable them to achieve their potential. Many subjects now produce busy power points to teach lessons for the Broad General Education and National 4 and 5, which is not the best way for visually impaired pupils to learn therefore it is essential there is a qualified subject teacher of visual impairment to adapt this information. Materials are being lost or forgotten about as supply teachers and new teachers join schools. Pupils who need enlarged materials or Braille materials often find that the class teacher has not had time, or remembered them. If a qualified teacher and subject teacher supports the child then that individual can adapt and discuss the lesson orally. If it is an unqualified teacher then they often just remove the child from the classroom and do something else because of a lack of knowledge. Is this acceptable in 2015?

Who knows what these young people may achieve? Did you know that most visually impaired people with a degree stand the same chance of getting a job as a sighted person who does not have a degree?

You must ask yourself:

What would I want for my child if he or she were visually impaired?