Attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment

Royal Blind is the largest and longest established Scottish organisation supporting people with a visual impairment, and among the services we provide is the Royal Blind School. We are delighted to have the opportunity to contribute information and ideas to this call for evidence.

The number one priorities for improving the attainment levels of pupils with visual impairment/hearing impairment are the training of teachers, the provision of resources, a fuller understanding of inclusion and the provision of a suitable environment.

There are many qualified teachers of the visually impaired (QTVI) who have retired and this has left a huge deficit in those who are able to fully understand how to educate pupils with visual impairment. This is evidenced in some local authority areas where there is only one teacher who has a remit covering additional support needs and sensory support needs, without the necessary qualification. There are instances of teachers being appointed to these posts on a temporary basis and never afforded the opportunity to gain the training they require within the field of visual and other impairments.

In relation to Unit provisions the standard and quality of staff training has reduced, with many teachers not having gained the Post Graduate Diploma and fully contracted Braille. The post graduate qualification and Braille are essential in equipping teachers to teach pupils who are blind. Braille is their main medium for learning, but in recent years it has become common practice to only facilitate the learning of uncontracted braille. This puts children at a serious disadvantage and their long term access to education and attainment is likely to be adversely affected. In relation to the post graduate diploma, some teachers are not being afforded the time or financial support to complete the necessary qualifications to work with this group of pupils, and this is a very worrying situation.

Within the national provision, the Royal Blind School, all staff either have or are working towards their Post Graduate Diploma and/or Braille and are working all day, every day with pupils who are visually impaired. The difference in attainment of pupils when exposed to these inputs is significant and observable. The Scottish Government should promote training for post graduate qualification and Braille.

Without the appropriate training, staff in schools cannot properly set the level of attainment that can be targeted for a pupil. Without the appropriate staffing levels, that potential cannot be reached. Within schools, we have observed many cases...
where staffing levels are being reduced and some pupils are then being ‘supported’ by untrained and inexperienced staff who, although doing their best, do not have the skills to work with this pupil group or the leadership and support required to enable them to gain them.

Pupils’ attainment and success is adversely affected when the process of planning, (both IEP and CSP) is done without the necessary knowledge and experience. We have observed posts in relation to leading and managing Unit provisions being filled by teachers with managerial experience but not with experience or qualification in visual impairment. It is common experience within the field that teachers (QTVI) are taken from their role or duties around the visually impaired pupil to provide absence cover. This means that the visually impaired pupil does without. Supporting pupils is crucial to their success and attainment and this practice should be signified as very poor practice; it is a worrying trend.

Measures to establish a duty on local authorities to allocate staff with significant experience to quality assure what is going on within both mainstream and specialist provisions would help establish this. Similarly, a duty on HMIE/Education Scotland to monitor what is happening across the country regarding inclusion and attainment and what the steps have been taken to establish and maintain inclusion in practice.

Royal Blind is preparing to contribute to the knowledge and practice deficits identified above by launching a visual impairment education resource centre under the name “Royal Blind Learning Hub”. Governmental support for this initiative would be welcome and can enable us to extend the reach and effectiveness of the service.

The concept of inclusion must not begin and end with the fact of a child attending a local mainstream school. We are concerned to promote a fuller understanding on the part of teachers and other professionals as to what true inclusion means in practice and in detail. True inclusion does not simply mean attending the same building as non-impaired pupils but rather being as far as possible part of every aspect of classroom and school life across the full curriculum. We believe attainment of this at the moment to be good in places but not consistently so, and there is a need for leadership and education in this area.

Pupils with visual impairment may be the only pupil in the school or class with a sensory loss and this, from experience, is very isolating for pupils and affects their health and wellbeing. Initiatives to bring together children and young people with common experience should be encouraged.

High quality adaptation or modification of text to Braille or Braille to text is not always facilitated. This is an area that is crucial to the success and attainment of the visually impaired pupil. Access to a transcription service is essential in providing suitably adapted and tailored materials to suit learners’ needs, as is the standardisation of
any adaptations or modifications. As one specific example, the training of teachers and other staff on the importance of tactile graphics and the reading of pictures is vital to the success and attainment levels of pupils with visual impairment. This is an area often missed and is one that requires experience to realise success in maths, science and the arts.

For most pupils with visual impairment, extra time is required to assimilate information accessed through auditory means or touch. In a busy classroom environment, this is not always remembered and among other priorities may be seen as not possible to give. With a decrease in in-classroom support staff we are perceiving as well as of qualified teachers of the visually impaired as previously referred to, the need for this is not always asserted and acknowledged within the school environment. Leadership and training are key, as well as adequate classroom resourcing.

Habilitation (mobility, independence and orientation is essential if pupils with visual impairment are to realise their potential. There is a scarcity of habilitation specialists working in schools and special units. This means that young people are not achieving their potential in relation to independence or life skills and are at a serious disadvantage in relation to their sighted peers and as they move through school and beyond. Whether or not they achieve academically, their ability to match their peers on a social level is a key element in the education of a visually impaired child. It has a life time effect and exacerbates the very high level of unemployment among people with visual impairment. Attainment and success in this area will only be achieved with input and this will only happen if there are extra funds and support available. Within the Royal Blind School, there is a team of habilitation specialists and the difference in pupil attainment is recognised by all who witness the benefits of this essential service.

This consultation relates to those pupils purely with visual impairment, hearing impairment or dual sensory impairment but we suggest that it would be appropriate also to have regard to the school population of pupils with visual impairment who also have additional needs - this area poses the same and also further issues regarding appropriateness of placement. The Royal Blind School, and the local authority special units when operating at their best, have a staff complement steeped in the world of visual impairment and education across the curriculum and in habilitation, and it is a waste of this resource if a child who is not ideally placed locally through their being visually impaired and having further educational needs is refused a place at this kind of establishment. The Doran Report (2012) recognised the need for a range of provisions but this still does not seem to be recognised by all. A desire for localism must not drown out all consideration of attainment and the consequent quality of adult life. To meet the needs of all visually impaired learners and to ensure that maximum attainment is achieved at all levels, all needs should be
considered in line with GIRFEC and cost of specific placements should not and never should be allowed to prevent the attainment of an individual pupil.

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