Access to learning, Learning to Access

An investigation of the outcomes of children and young people with vision impairment
– Summary Report

Contents

Introduction

Purpose of the Access to Learning, Learning to Access study

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the implementation of the principles of the Access to Learning, Learning to Access model in the education of children and young people with vision impairment (Hewett et al, 2022). This dual model of education recognises the importance of ensuring that children and young people with vision impairment have access to the school curriculum, while also ensuring that they have opportunity to develop the skills and experiences needed to promote their independence. The expectation of the model is that over time the emphasis will shift from educational interventions to support **access to learning** and instead focus on interventions which support the child in **learning to access.** The objective of the model is therefore that once the young person leaves education, they are as independent as possible once moving into adulthood.

While such aspirations are widely accepted by specialist vision impairment educators in the UK, the questions remain of how well understood this is by non-specialist educators. Therefore, there are concerns about the extent to which the principles of the dual access model are being applied in day-to-day education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the day-to-day experiences of children and young people with vision impairment

in accessing education: the extent to which they have fair and optimal access to the school curriculum (access to learning), and the extent to which they have opportunities to develop their independence and experience social inclusion (learning to access).

Through this study, we have:

1. Observed the skills development of children and young people with vision impairment over an extended period of seven to ten months.
2. Explored their experiences in education, including the enablers and barriers that contribute to these experiences.
3. Investigated, from the perspective of different stakeholders around the child/young person, how the Access to Learning, Learning to Access model can best be implemented.

This summary report provides an overview of the key findings from the project.

Authors: This research has been led by Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, University of Birmingham.

Background to the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

The Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) is a UK-wide framework launched in March 2022, and has since been adopted by vision impairment educators across the UK (Hewett et al., 2022; Hewett et al., 2023).

The CFVI acts as a framework for supporting children and young people with vision impairment in accessing the general curriculum and developing the broad range of skills needed to learn alongside their peers and live as independently as possible in adulthood. The framework clarifies and defines interventions, best practice support and the essential skills that children and young people with vision impairment need to develop. It also offers a shared vocabulary for specialist and non-specialist education professionals, children and young people and their families. Importantly, it provides a roadmap to a more inclusive education for children and young people with vision impairment. The CFVI address the broad spectrum of needs within this population and is designed for ages 0-25.

The framework presents outcomes within 11 areas of learning:

- **Area 1:** Facilitating an inclusive world
- **Area 2:** Sensory development
- **Area 3:** Communication
- **Area 4:** Literacy
- **Area 5:** Habilitation: orientation and mobility
- **Area 6:** Habilitation: independent living skills
- **Area 7:** Accessing information
- **Area 8:** Technology
- **Area 9:** Health: social, emotional, mental and physical wellbeing
- **Area 10:** Social, sports and leisure
- **Area 11:** Preparing for adulthood

Acknowledgements

Overview of case study participants

The project was constructed around case studies of 12 children and young people aged between 6 to 14 at the time of the first interview. They were being educated at a wide range of settings, including mainstream schools, mainstream schools with a vision impairment (VI) resource base, special schools for children with VI and special schools for children with special education needs and disability (SEND).

In addition to speaking with the child/young person, we also interviewed a range of supporting adults, including parents/carers, specialist professionals, classroom teachers, special education needs coordinators (SENCos), additional learning needs coordinators (ALNCOs) and learning support assistants. In total, 52 participants took part in the case study interviews. Data was collected over two-rounds of interviews, which allowed us to track the children and young people's experiences of specialist skills development over time.

Table 1: Overview of children and young people who participated in the study (at time of recruitment)

The following table has three columns and thirty four rows.

Characteristic	Total (N)	Total (%)
Age at time of first interview		
6	1	8%
7	1	8%
8	1	8%
9	1	8%
10	1	8%
11	5	42%
12	0	0%
13	1	8%
14	1	8%
Nature of school attended		
Primary	5	42%
Secondary	4	33%
Covering primary and secondary ages	3	25%
Type of school attended		
Mainstream	4	33%
Mainstream with VI resource based	4	33%
Special SEN School	1	8%
Specialist VI School	3	25%
Disability		
Vision impairment only	6	50%
Vision impairment and additional need(s)	6	50%
Primary way of accessing information in school		
Print	1	8%
Electronic (e.g. laptop or tablet)	4	33%
Braille (electronic or physical)	7	58%
Use of mobility aids		
Uses cane	8	67%
Does not use cane	4	33%
Geographical location		
England (South)	8	67%
England (Midlands)	2	17%
Wales	2	17%

The interviews explored a range of topics, including:

- Inclusion in school and the classroom
- Specialist skills development
- Accessing support and resources
- Collaborative working
- Aspirations for the child/young person over a six-month period

Educational experiences of children and young people with vision impairment in school

The case studies explored the main enablers and barriers faced by children and young people with vision impairment in navigating academic and social life in the school environment.

Enablers

One of the major enablers that was widely discussed across all interviews was the **development of social relationships and close friendships** with peers and teachers at school. The findings of the study indicate that the development of friendships at school and the promotion of peer support are important for facilitating the educational inclusion of students with vision impairment.

> **"Her friends have got a really good understanding now and they've obviously matured... they now understand that this is what Esme needs. Like when we go out to play, Esme can't come and find us, so, we know where to wait. She's got really good peer support and she's very social."** SENCO

Participants highlighted the importance of whole school initiatives aimed at encouraging facilitating the development of social relationships and close friendships among students with vision impairment and their sighted peers.

> **"Because of the environment we have here, it's much more inclusive and everyone is working on something and they're working in small groups, working to a similar target. When we all come back together, rather than children being constantly pulled out and realise that we need to do one-to-one intervention."** Classroom teacher

A second enabler identified was the presence of **specific personal factors** that might positively influence the educational experience of children and young people with vision impairment. Examples include the underlying confidence of the child or young person, their associated autonomy and their underlying independence.

> **"She's been learning braille and is quite independent, navigating her way around the school. She's a long cane user. She communicates verbally very well. She's a nice, chatty young lady."** QTVI

Participants also referred to the positive effect of **inclusive school attitudes** on the academic and social experiences of students with vision impairment. Relevant factors

included structured and familiar settings, environmental adjustments, adult support in developing students' autonomy and holistic approaches which take into consideration the specific needs of the individual.

A final type of enabler was the provision of **specialist adjustments and the development of specialist skills.** All participants discussed the presence of specific adaptations made to support the student with vision impairment to ensure access to learning and school life, while also enabling students to develop the specialised skills that will be needed in adult life. This included anticipatory adjustments by staff, opportunities to develop specialist skills during the school day and opportunities for non-specialist educators to improve their understanding of how to make adjustments.

> **"As far as our Education, Health Care can go, we are very lucky as a school that we have the very strong body of professionals. We have our own QTVIs and our own experienced staff. Some staff are experts in the CFVI. We also have our own qualified habilitation specialists. So, when it comes to us, putting in support, we are able to do the majority of it in-house."**
> Deputy Head

Barriers

Several child or young person-specific factors acted as barriers to educational experiences. These included challenges in developing staff and peer relationships, their acceptance of their vision impairment, their underlying self-confidence, their underlying independence and their confidence to self-advocate.

> **"She hasn't been in our school very long at all, and I know that she's been quite anxious and we're at a delicate stage of her willingness to accept where she is with her visual condition."**
> SENCO

In contrast to the identified enablers, participants described experiences where **educators' attitudes and practices** created barriers to inclusion. This included negative input from educators, misallocations of educational support and limited preparation among educators.

> **"He had all this understanding, and nobody took the time to explain to him what was going on. It was very traumatic to him. He's had a lot of trust issues which we've had counsellors and things throughout life to help him develop that. His schooling was very, very difficult because of the trust issues he had with adults."** Parent

Other barriers included **not providing sufficient access to learning and not making necessary anticipatory adjustments.** This involved making necessary adjustments to the learning environment and failing to consider inclusion from the outset.

"I think that that could make more barriers for their learning and possibly affect their wellbeing. It could be quite isolating to be sat there thinking, 'I can't take part in that.'" Classroom teacher

A final barrier was the failure of **staff to encourage the autonomy of the child/young person**, often due to lower expectations than they would have for their sighted peers. The lack of encouragement can lead to a cycle in which children and young people with vision impairment are not given equal opportunities to practice independent decision-making.

"I always find that when you've got a school based TA, they either over support and they do everything for them – or it's the other end of spectrum, where at lunchtime, they go on other duties, and they leave them to do whatever. " Habilitation officer

Development of specialist skills

A key focus of the study was to explore the opportunities available children and young people with vision impairment to develop specialist skills during the school day. Positively, through the discussions, it was possible to identify specific examples and evidence of skills development related to Areas 1-11 of the CFVI.

Positive factors in skills development included:

- The young person's enjoyment and willingness to learn

- Person-centred approaches

- Development of a safe environment in which to learn

- Integrated skills development into the core curriculum

"It's a very helpful skill. I love touch typing, it's just relaxing. And it's just a good thing to know how to do. Every Wednesday morning, I do touch typing." Young Person, Area 8 – Technology

Challenges in skills development included:

- Reluctance to be taken out of lessons

- Hesitation to look different to peers

- Overconfidence in areas where they might struggle more than they realise

"She's really confident, but I'd say overconfident – not safely confident. And then she has two very risk averse one-to-one teaching assistants. So there's kind of a constant like shrugging them off situation." Parent

The professionals and parents supporting the child and young people acknowledged the importance of balancing access to learning with the promotion of independence. As conceptualised within the CFVI, this balance between Access to Learning and Learning to Access is essential to promote and ensure educational and social inclusion.

"They want to get the balance right between giving Esme the support that she needs, but not making her be reliant on it – trying to give her the independence and learning skills to accomplish those things on her own." Parents

Two of the case studies highlighted positive examples of skills development over time, during which both children were able to achieve the 6-months goals they had set. In the first case study, the child wished to focus on their independent living skills, including personal hygiene and developing strategies for working independently. Enablers included early collaboration and communication with the school and a strategic reduction in unnecessary adult intervention. In the second case study, the child wanted to develop their independent living skills, develop their braille and reading skills and become more involved in community groups. Enablers included person-centred review meetings, strong and consistent home-school communication and opportunity to take part in community groups through an age-appropriate group.

Enablers and barriers to supporting the delivery of the CFVI in School

In addition to understanding what types of specialist skills were being developed and what the outcomes were, an objective of the research was to improve understanding of the enablers and barriers that impact how effectively the CFVI can be implemented on a day-to-day basis within the infrastructure and the systems of the school.

Enablers to implementing the CFVI

Identified enablers to implementing the CFVI included **being able to draw upon specialist knowledge and understanding of the CFVI** and having a **strategic approach** as well as an overall commitment to **inclusive practices**. The CFVI itself was identified as a facilitator for all of these:

> **"Having the CFVI as a formal, recognised document helps and it helps us to sort of champion it to say this is not just meaningful, but right. I think it's really helpful to have it clearly laid out as we see it as an entitlement."** QTVI

Barriers to implementing the CFVI

In contrast, identified barriers to implementing the CFVI included an **uneven level of specialist training** among staff, **limited funding**, **time constraints**, **structural and contextual factors** and a **lack of a coherent strategy**.

> **"The school doesn't understand that those TAs will need time to learn those things, and they need time off timetable to do that. I think it's almost an expectation that they might do it in their own time and they don't. Nobody realises how hard it is to learn braille either."** QTVI

Collaboration between specialist and non-specialist professionals

A key finding of this study was the importance of the collaborative relationship between specialist and non-specialist education professionals in promoting the educational and social inclusion of children and young people with vision impairment. Effective collaboration leads to positive communication between specialists and non-specialists, joined up planning for educational transitions and improved implementation of the CFVI.

Enablers to collaboration included **approachable specialist staff** and **the introduction of the CFVI**, while barriers included the **reluctance of schools to collaborate**, limited opportunities of specialists to **contribute to key decisions** and **a lack of training and mentoring** opportunities.

"Right from last year, when I knew I was going to have Esme in my class. There's been really good support from all of them. Any questions I have, I can go and ask – especially our QTVI, because she knows loads of things, and she's very approachable."
Classroom Teacher

Non-specialists expressed a reliance on specialists for guidance on adapting curriculum content, providing specialist equipment and resources, interpreting guidelines and making informed decisions about the educational experience of children and young people with vision impairment.

Parent and carer perspectives

Supporting the child at home

Parents play a significant role in the development of independent living, orientation and mobility skills for children and young people with vision impairment, including the intentional scaffolding of skill development within the home environment. By **actively engaging with educational professionals** and maintaining a clear understanding of the young person's targets, particularly those informed by frameworks such as the CFVI, parents help to ensure that learning is reinforced outside of school. This coordination facilitates a more seamless transfer and generalisation of skills between school and home contexts, promoting consistency, accelerating progress and fostering greater independence over time.

> **"I know in ILS at the moment, the lads use the air fryer. So we've got an air fryer at home. So, every time we use that, he's like, 'well, can I program it and figure this out?' So, everything he's learned, it's like, 'oh, can we do it at home?' And I say 'yeah, of course you can.'"** Parent

Parents reported negotiating their child's long-term independence through the **reinforcement of specialist skills**, such as orientation, mobility, and independent living and addressing immediate concerns related to safety, academic priorities and emotional well-being. Many reported feeling conflicted between the desire to make their child's access to the world easier in the moment by providing direct assistance and the recognition that consistent practice of these skills at home is critical for fostering autonomy in the future. This is further complicated by several factors, including anxiety about potential risks, the child's resistance to practicing at home, parental reluctance to impose additional demands after a full school day and a lack of access to specialist guidance within the home environment.

These challenges underscore the need for tailored parental support and structured collaboration between families and professionals to sustain skill development beyond the classroom. Safety concerns can prompt parents to "wrap" their child or delay skill practice, even at the cost of missed learning opportunities.

> **"Things like independent living – I just think she's going to have to do it at some point and we might as well try it while we're here. So for certain skill sets, we're quite pro. But yeah, like the major danger I find is like going out and about. And I think that's where the big fall down has been for us is that there's been no home support."** Parents

Navigating the education system and working with professionals

Parents described securing appropriate support for their children as extremely challenging, where provision often felt like a **"postcode lottery,"** where **parental persistence** became a prerequisite for accessing even basic entitlements. This inconsistency in support forces families into advocacy roles, with parents spending significant time and emotional energy simply to initiate assessments or secure funding. Even once applications are underway, systemic failures and bureaucratic obstacles create further barriers. The absence of a consistent caseworker or coordinator leaves parents negotiating with different contacts who lack full knowledge of their child's needs.

"I had to instigate that myself. I went to the local authority and said, 'I think my child needs an EHCP.' They responded with, 'For what?' I said, 'My child is blind.' They said, 'Well, okay, we'll see if he qualifies. Not everyone does.' That's how it was." Parent

Funding panels and school placements hinge on **slow-moving approvals**, with parents left to chase progress. During school selection, some local schools openly refused to admit a child because of unmet accommodations for vision impairments. Parents warned that without persistence and "shouting", many families would fail to unlock seemingly "hidden" support. In some cases, parents bypassed the council entirely to work directly with schools to further realise the current systematic and bureaucratic failures.

Many parents described **a lack of reliable information and support**, relying instead on internet searches and peer networks to navigate complex support pathways. Occasionally, local early-years provisions filled the gap by advising on benefits and linking families to critical services like the National Portage Association. Looking ahead to secondary transition, parents already anticipate that the next phase of their child's schooling will require the same level of relentless self-advocacy.

"Having to advocate for your kid to get what they need and what they should be getting is exhausting – it's mentally exhausting and emotionally draining. Anything that clarifies the position and takes out the ambiguities, especially when people don't want to fulfil their obligations, is just helpful for the parents." Parent

The narratives shared by parents and carers demonstrate the burden they bear in navigating inconsistent provision, bureaucratic failures and information gaps. Their experiences highlight an urgent need for more transparent systems, reliable points of contact and proactive sharing of information to ensure equitable, high-quality support for every child and young-person with vision impairment.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings from this project demonstrate the importance of specialist support to ensure that children and young people with vision impairment can benefit from an inclusive education, while also having opportunity to develop the various skills and experiences required to become as independent and prepared for adulthood as possible.

However, the success of such specialist intervention is also dependent on successful collaboration between specialists and non-specialists, parents and the child or young person. The study has highlighted that even with specialist support, children with vision impairment can face significant barriers to learning and social inclusion – underscoring the importance of professionals and families working together to prevent this. It also demonstrates the need for a clear and shared strategic approach to embedding skills development into the school day.

Similarly, the study has shown how children and young people with vision impairment can face many challenges beyond simply having access to learning. This can include a lack of confidence, resistance to looking different in front of their peers, challenges in establishing friendships and having to manage other health/disability needs. This emphasises why the CFVI and its holistic perspective of children's needs is so important.

Additionally, the study also highlighted the ongoing challenges which can be faced by parents when navigating the education system, as well as the important role they play in facilitating skills development outside of school.

Overall, the study has demonstrated the value in taking a comprehensive look at the experiences of children and young people with vision impairment, by considering both their personal experiences and also the experiences and contribution of the broad range of people around them.

Recommendations

1. **Adopt the CFVI:** The CFVI should be adopted by all specialist and non-specialist professionals working with children and young people with vision impairment.

2. **Strategic and anticipatory support:** Support should be strategic and anticipatory, allowing for a collaborative joined-up process between specialists, non-specialists and parents/carers.

3. **Engagement with parents and carers:** Specialist professionals should have opportunity to engage with parents and carers to ensure that they are able to facilitate the development of specialist skills in the home.

4. **Training for non-specialist staff:** Non-specialist staff working with children and young people with vision impairment should have access to appropriate training to ensure they understand how to make necessary adjustments and their role in facilitating the Access to Learning, Learning to Access model of support.

5. **Person-centred planning:** Planning should be person-centred to ensure that support meets the aspirations and holistic needs of the child or young person.

6. **Clear and consistent information:** Parents and carers should have access to clear and consistent information to enable them to navigate the education system and to know how best to support their child.

7. **Further research:** Further research should be conducted into how the CFVI can most effectively be embedded into the school day.

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