

LESLEY NEWTON

ASSIGNMENT 4 – RESEARCH PROJECT

CONTENT

	Page
Introduction	1
Literature Review	1
Devising the Questionnaire	6
The Questionnaire	7
Presentation of Results	8
Summary of Results	11
References	13
Appendices	14

AS A MOBILITY SPECIALIST: HOW BEST CAN I DEVELOP MY INPUT AND SUPPORT IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS?

Introduction

For a few years now the author of this project has had a special interest in carrying out mobility and orientation programmes with children with visual impairment and additional needs. This interest grew from attending seminars, reading material and especially from involvement over the past few years of extending mobility sessions to include working in special schools. This helped me to see a need to raise the profile in this area and to develop this area of work to help pupils with additional needs to reach their full potential in independence. As a student of the Advance Certificate in Education the ideal opportunity has arisen to allow research in this area and develop my personal input to the special schools that I work with. It is hoped that from this research the Cambridgeshire Visual Impairment Service can develop mobility input to support special schools in Cambridgeshire and develop strong working relationships.

Information on mobility and orientation with children with visual impairment and additional needs was gathered from seminars, the RNIB website, speaking with colleagues and reading books, journals and articles. As a result it has strengthened my desire to research and promote the importance of this specialist area.

The reason I believe mobility and orientation are so important is that the ability to move in and around the environment affects people psychologically, socially, emotionally, economically and physically. There is a direct connection between movement and learning. Through moving within our environment an understanding of the world is developed. Children who are born with severe visual impairment and additional needs can have problems in forming correct concepts of their own bodies. Their mental map and concepts of the world and their own position in it may be very limited. For these children education in mobility is essential and should start from an early age and continue throughout the child's school life.

Literature Review

While looking through the RNIB reading list I came across several books and articles related to the subject of interest and borrowed these to help me with my research. Juliet Stone's book "Mobility for Special Needs" was an excellent source with so much relevant information that I could relate to in my quest to highlight the importance of mobility for children in special schools. She states, "If children are able to move independently their world expands and they can be exposed to a far wider range of real experiences. This will feed into all their development and learning, including their language, literacy and understanding concepts. (Stone, 1995) Many mobility specialists,

including myself, agree with Juliet Stone's statement that mobility skills play an important part in developmental learning.

William Goodman in his book "Mobility Training for People with Disabilities" agrees with this stating that, "If a disabled person is not mobile at a level near his potential, the effectiveness of all other special education and rehabilitation services is blunted and his quality of life compromised. Achieving a reasonable level of mobility is a high priority goal, directly linked to active participation in life, and to establishing one's place in society." (Goodman, 1989) Every child, whatever their disabilities, will have the potential to reach a goal that will allow them to achieve a level of independence. The level of mobility reached will be an individual achievement whether it is learning to walk a route independently or a child in a wheelchair guiding the adult by recognising landmarks and clues in the environment and making decisions on which way the adult should take. William Goodman goes on to say, "Progress in mobility has the power to bolster other aspects of personal growth. It bars positively on overall adjustment and on a healthy self-image." (Goodman, 1989)

Juliet Stone's book also points out how important a multi-professional and cross-curricular approach is. "This book argues for a multi-professional and cross-curricular approach to education in mobility and orientation. With children who have additional difficulties to their visual impairment or who are profoundly disabled, this is particularly important. The staff who are most intimately involved with the child must be fully involved with the mobility programme. They will know the best means of communicating with the child and they will also know what is the most motivating factor for each individual". (Stone, 1995) I fully agree with the statement and have found the information from key staff to be of extremely good value when first meeting with and working with children with multiple disabilities. Building up a relationship and understanding with these children can take a long time but can be shortened by working alongside a valuable member of staff. Their knowledge and expertise is greatly appreciated.

Many mobility skills are taken for granted by those with sight as they happen naturally but when looked at in more detail with a visually impaired child in mind it becomes clear how important intervention becomes. Early intervention is a very important factor to take into consideration. "All life skills are more easily learnt if they are begun early in childhood". (Stone, 1995) Again William Goodman agrees with my own and Juliet Stone's view that early intervention is important. "For those born with a disability and those who become disabled during their early years, mobility training should begin as early as possible, in small, measured steps, carefully tailored to the child's physical and emotional readiness." (Goodman, 1989)

It is important that when assessing a child with visual impairment and additional needs a variety of factors need to be taken into account and an appropriate mobility programme constructed. Mark Batshaw argues that children with multiple disabilities do not always have their disabilities looked at equally and states, "Whereas motor impairments tend to receive most

attention in the early years after the initial diagnosis of cerebral palsy, associate disabilities such as learning difficulties, attention and behaviour problems, mental retardation, and sensory impairments tend to come to the fore in the setting of elementary school. For many children, it is these associated problems, rather than their motor disability, that put them at greatest disadvantage relative to their peers.” (Batshaw, 1997) I believe that this can sometimes be the case and therefore feel it is important to give careful consideration to a holistic approach when assessing a child.

Mobility and independence is achieved at many different levels and for those children with multiple disabilities it is important that they can strive towards a level of independence no matter how small. They will benefit from being stimulated and encouraged to learn about and interact with their environment. William Goodman makes a similar point stating “Incidental learning occurs even while a disabled person takes a trip with another person who leads the way. Passive mobility, making a trip while dependent on another person, is preferable to being shut-in without any chance for getting outside.” I would add to this that while the trip takes place it would be an ideal opportunity for the adult to take time to speak about the environment to the child and to bring to their attention relevant sensory landmarks and clues. Simple route sequencing can be achieved this way and eventually a child may anticipate or even indicate what to expect on route. Elizabeth Chapman also feels that mobility and sensory awareness is an important area in education and explains “... mobility and self-help skills, learning through listening, discovery by touch, and the enhancement of residual vision will have some relevance in the education of children whose multiple handicaps include visual defect.” (Chapman, 1978)

The principle of sharing information and drawing attention to sensory landmarks and clues can be undertaken while moving around the school environment. In fact it is already being undertaken in the special schools that I visit. Members of staff share and draw attention to environmental information with children on route and sometimes include objects of reference. Using objects of reference is a method supported by Chet Lubecki, who in his article “O & M Techniques for Special Populations” quotes, “Object cuing. An action concept can be communicated to a noncommunicative client by presenting her with a single item that can represent an area the instructor is questing her to locate.” (Lubecki, 1994)

Mobility education and skills cover a wide area. Understanding spatial and environmental concepts and language is a skill incorporated into mobility training. How can we help a child with visual impairment and additional needs to understand the meaning of above and below? Do they really understand what we mean when we mention doors, windows, radiators, kerbs, roads etc? If not how do we teach these concepts to them? Juliet Stone points out, “Spatial language is used continually in everyday life”. She goes on to say, “There is an enormous number of environmental concepts which the children need to understand in order to travel successfully.” (Stone, 1995)

There are many questions and issues to consider when developing orientation and spatial concepts to a child who has been born without sight, as their learning will be different to those born with sight. Juliet Stone points out the important differences and effects of learning between children born with sight and of those born with little or no sight. "Maintaining orientation is little problem for these sighted children. Even before they being to crawl and walk, they have already begun to learn about space and to develop their spatial knowledge. Once they are moving, they confirm their knowledge through their explorations. They need no specific intervention to teach them about special concepts. However, children with little or no vision or with learning difficulties will need a structured programme of direct teaching if the concepts involved in orientation are to be established." (Stone, 1995)

Understanding distance is an area of mobility that children with visual impairment and additional needs find difficult to grasp and therefore need intervention. For sighted children learning about distance happens naturally and does not pose a problem. "For sighted people, their understanding of distance comes through their vision and they relate objects in space to each other to themselves very easily." (Stone, 1995)

Comparing how a sighted and non-sighted child becomes familiar with the layout of a room shows that extra time and effort is needed on the part of a non-sighted child. Stone points out that, "Fully sighted people are able to get a detailed knowledge of a room through a split-second glance. Children who are visually impaired have no such immediate power." (Stone, 1995) An ambulant child with little or no sight needs time to explore a room. A child with little or no sight and who is a wheelchair user will also need time to be taken around a new room and given the opportunity to explore the environment.

Allowing time is a very important factor when working with visually impaired children with multiple disabilities. Richard Welsh and Bruce Blasch argue this point stating, "The mobility specialist recognizes that orientation and mobility education, like other school subjects, cannot be crammed into a few weeks or even one year of the student's academic experience. It should begin when the child enters school at whatever level is appropriate, and be available as needed as he grows and proceeds towards commencement." (Welsh and Blasch, 1980) They go on to state the importance of mobility and ask questions, "It is important to be clear about the priority that mobility instruction receives in that setting. Is it given status as a regular class? Are sufficient and appropriate blocks of time available?"

It is important to look at each individual child and devise an individual mobility programme taking into account any restrictions and trying to see the world from that child's point of view. This may often involve taking into consideration a child's needs that uses a wheelchair. Stone makes this consideration mentioning, "... children using wheelchairs may have a limited idea of the world, because of the height at which they are sitting and also their restricted movement. Their ability to devise routes may be affected by this." (Stone, 1995)

Brent Bailey and Daniel Head in their article "Providing O&M Services to Children and Youth With Severe Multiple Disabilities" point out the importance of providing mobility programmes in real life situations. "Only by reviewing each student's real-life environments can the O&M instructor provide effective program support for a student". (Bailey and Head, 1993) There should be a purpose for the skills that the child is undertaking. Many of these children will not understand performing these skills out of context and may well become very confused and frustrated. "Learning to trail along a wall that is never travelled is of no real value. Instructing a student to trail along the route to the bathroom when it is necessary to do so is functional and meaningful." (Bailey and Head, 1993) They go on to say, "O&M instruction will have a greater impact for these students if all support personnel and care givers, including qualified O&M teachers, implement activity-based interventions. A student with severe multiple disabilities learns best when viewed as a whole person whose learning needs are interrelated with his or her typical daily life." (Bailey and Head, 1993) Several points, that I feel are relevant, are drawn together here for our attention by Bailey and Head showing the importance of a child being viewed as a whole person and that all those involved with the child should encourage meaningful mobility.

Further Welsh and Blasch express their opinion of multiple disabled students being in as much need of mobility as their peers to improve their quality of life. They state, "The presence of a number of handicaps in addition to deficits in intelligence and vision complicate the training program even further but should not necessarily exclude an individual from mobility instruction. The multiply handicapped person may be in need of this training far more than his less severely handicapped peers." (Welsh and Blasch, 1980) They go on to state, "It is important that the effort expended by both teacher and client be directed toward achievable goals that will improve the quality of life of a multiply handicapped person."

My questionnaire includes questions relating to whole-school policies, working closely with members of staff and staff training. This is essential for the child to reap maximum benefit. "It is important to realize that mobility and orientation education in school is not only the responsibility of the mobility specialist. In this crucial area of children's development and learning, everyone must be involved. Mobility is not just a matter of specialist training that takes place in a one-to-one session on perhaps two mornings a week. All staff must encourage it and support the training." (Stone, 1995) The importance of awareness raising and staff training cannot be overlooked to help build a closer working relationship between the visiting Mobility Specialist and school staff. "The role of the mobility specialist may not be understood by the staff in the school, and there may not be time for discussion to take place between the specialist and the other staff. This can make the mobility specialist feel very isolated and under-valued". (Stone, 1995)

Another area in which I am involved and is closely connected with mobility is looking at the environment and seeing how best it can be used or if any modifications could be made to make it easier for visually impaired and

physically disabled children to move around their school environment safely and independently. Juliet Stone noted, "There are two aspects of children with disabilities. The first is clearly the person with the disability and the second is the environment in which the person moves." (Stone, 1995) Special schools are aware of their environment and even more so now that new laws on disability and accessibility are being undertaken.

Devising the Questionnaire

While attending the GDBA centre in Hindhead, Surrey I attended a seminar of Lorraine Whitmarsh from the GDBA Policy & Research Department. As this is my first research project I found the seminar extremely valuable and was able to ask questions and make notes from the handouts. Lorraine suggested books that would be useful and I found "Using Questionnaires in Small-Scale Research" by Pamela Munn and Eric Drever and also "Doing Your Research Project – A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science" by Judith Bell extremely useful.

It was felt that as the research project was closely related to the Service I work for that I should meet with and discuss it with my Line Manager. This resulted in the decision that the questionnaire be given to the Headteacher or designated member of staff. There are ten special schools in Cambridgeshire and seven have visually impaired pupils attending and being supported in their school by the Service at the moment and so it was decided that the questionnaire go to these seven schools. Several meetings were held with my Line Manager and from these a covering letter from my Line Manager, an information sheet and a questionnaire were developed. A return date was given and a stamped address envelope enclosed.

After constructing a draft questionnaire for a pilot run, with the usual ethical considerations, several colleagues read through and made comments enabling me to adapt the questionnaire. As the time scale was short and the amount of schools involved small it was decided to keep the research fairly simple but to the point. I had hoped to be able to interview Headteachers and members of staff about mobility programmes and to observed sessions being undertaken but time did not allow for this. As a result it was decided that these interviews and observations could take place after the results of the research allowing me to follow up on the information received.

My Line Manager arranged for me to visit Michael Soaper, Research Manager, at Cambridgeshire County Council to discuss and receive his expert advice. This meeting was extremely beneficial and encouraging as questions I had were answered and rough edges and indecisions discussed and ironed out.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of tick boxes and two larger boxes for additional comments to allow for quantitative and qualitative results. There are seven

questions altogether with some being split into several parts. It is hoped that the information gathered from these questions will result in finding out what mobility skills are already being taught in school by school staff and/or an outside agency, how important schools feel mobility skills are and in what areas schools feel a mobility specialist could support their work.

Section A consists of three yes/no questions asking about mobility programmes that pupils are receiving at this moment in time. Question one and two enquire about timetabled and informal mobility sessions undertaken by school staff. Question three asks if an outside agency is involved with any mobility sessions.

Section B covers questions four to seven. Question four asks three questions (a-c) on the importance of mobility skills in school and there are five boxes from strongly agree to strongly disagree to choose from. Question five has a large box to allow for any other comments about the teaching of mobility skills.

Question six is designed to find out which areas of mobility a visiting mobility specialist could support in the school. There are ten sections (a-j) with a choice of three boxes to tick headed Essential, Desirable and Not Necessary. To finish Question 7 has a large box to allow for any other comments.

The project covers the seven special schools that I work in. A space was left for individual schools to place the school name if they wished. It was decided that the results of the research would appear in the Christmas edition of 'Eye Contact' a quarterly information magazine from the Service. The outcome of this project will allow for further discussion with the seven schools and answer my research question of how best I can develop my input and support in special schools.

As the data received is coming from just seven schools it is felt that results would be best presented in grid form showing results out of seven on the original questionnaire. This simple method will allow the results to be shown at a glance. I have commented on these findings at the end of each section.

It was felt that the best way to present the research project would be to meet briefly with the Headteacher or designated member of staff. I telephoned each school to make an appointment and where possible arranged for the Service's Specialist Teacher to also be there. The purpose of this was to explain the importance of the project and to be able to answer any questions. This method proved to be beneficial as it gave opportunity for discussion and thus had already become a shared project.

Presentation of Results

Section A – about your pupils mobility

	Yes	No
Q1 Do any of your visually impaired pupils receive timetable (a regular slot in the school timetable) sessions with school staff to encourage and practise specific mobility skills within the school?	4	2
Q2 Do any of your visually impaired pupils receive informal (not timetabled) mobility skills training with school staff during the school day?	7	0
Q3 Do any of your visually impaired pupils receive Mobility sessions from an outside agency (The Visual Impairment Service, Social Services, Guide Dogs for the Blind or Royal National Institute for the Blind)?	5	2

The findings above show that four out of six schools timetable pupils for mobility sessions. One school did not answer the first questions. The second question shows that all seven schools give pupils informal mobility training during the school day. Five out of seven schools receive mobility input from an outside agency. Two schools say they do not receive outside input and of these added not currently.

Section B

Q4 Please indicate how far your agree/disagree with the following statement

	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
(a) Mobility skills training is recognised as a specific teaching area in our school.	2	3	1	1	0
(b) Do you feel that mobility skills should be taught?	5	2	0	0	0
(c) Do you feel that training is essential for your staff?	5	2	0	0	0

These findings show that two strongly agree and three agree that mobility skills training is recognised as a specific teaching area in their school. One was of no opinion and one disagreed with the statement. Following on from this five strongly agreed and two agreed that mobility skills should be taught. Five strongly agree and two agree that training is essential for staff.

Q5 Do you have any other comments about the teaching of mobility skills?

“Although it is recognised – we need input/help and staff training to be much more effective. Time constraints and building issues make this a real problem area for us.”

“Following one of our pupils receiving input from the VI service re-mobility, we have been made much more aware of how important mobility teaching is and how we can do it more successfully.”

These comments show that by receiving mobility input schools are often made aware of the importance of mobility training and that input and staff training would help mobility training be more effective.

Q6 The Mobility specialist could help in the following areas. How important do you think this assistance is for your school?

	Essential	Desirable	Not Necessary
(a) Assess orientation and mobility skills.	3	4	0
(b) Implement training programmes with pupils to meet identified needs.	4	3	0
(c) Design and implement specific training prior to transition (eg to secondary school or college).	4	3	0
(d) Train school staff: 1 to 1 with key LSA	4	3	0
(e) Train school staff: small group awareness raising and training.	1	5	1
(f) Train school staff: whole school awareness raising.	1	4	1
(g) Carry out an audit of the physical environment of the school.	3	4	0
(h) Provide written reports and feedback on visits.	6	1	0
(i) Attend Annual Reviews.	1	4	1
(j) Link with other agencies and professionals, eg Social Services and Health Departments.	4	3	0

The findings of Q6 show that three schools feel it is essential and four desirable for me to assess orientation and mobility skills. Four schools feel it is essential and three desirable to implement training programmes, provide

training prior to transfer and train 1 to 1 with key LSA. The majority of schools also feel it is desirable to train small groups and give whole school awareness raising sessions. Three schools feel it is essential and four desirable that I carry out environmental audits. This is reinforced by the two comments in the Q7 box. Six schools thought it essential and 1 desirable that I provide written reports and feedback on visits. Four plus a question mark felt attendance at Annual Reviews was desirable. One school felt it was essential and one not necessary to attend. Four schools felt it essential and three desirable that I link with other agencies and professionals.

Q7 Any other comments:

“Sorry – some are not a straight yes/no. Re Cambridge Special School Review I really hope there will be mobility input into the layout/design/colour schemes etc.”

“Liaison would be useful with new-build projects and redecoration, to ensure needs of VI pupils recognised.”

These two comments show that schools welcome input regarding layout, design and colour schemes in school and new-build projects.

Summary of Results

The findings show that all schools are providing mobility training whether timetabled or informal. It shows that the majority of the seven schools are receiving input from an outside agency.

It is clear that schools have a strong belief that mobility training should be taught and that it is essential for staff to receive training. However results show that in some schools mobility skills training is not recognised as a specific teaching area and this is an area that needs to be addressed. Comments show that raising awareness of the importance of mobility training and further input and staff training would be appreciated and beneficial in support staff in this area.

Question six highlights my involvement as a Mobility Specialist. It shows that it is felt that I should be involved with assessments and implementing training programmes including transitions. Although four schools felt that 1 to 1 training was essential the majority of schools felt that small group and whole school awareness raising was desirable. I have already been involved with 1

to 1 training but feel I need to develop my involvement with small group and whole school training and awareness raising.

High priority is suggested, reinforced by two comments in the Q7 box, regarding my involvement with environmental audits. Similarly the majority of schools felt that written reports, feedback on visits and attendance at Annual Reviews was also an important area for me to be involved in. It was also felt that linking with other agencies and professionals an important area to pursue and this is an area that I have been developing.

As a result of the above I feel that the following areas would benefit from being developed and thus address the question of how best I can develop my input and support in special schools:

- ❖ ensure that schools receive input where necessary
- ❖ assure mobility training is seen as a specific teaching area
- ❖ give staff training and awareness raising sessions in small group and whole school settings
- ❖ develop involvement with layout/design/colour schemes in school and new-build projects.
- ❖ develop networking with other agencies and professionals.

I will be contacting the schools next term to discuss the findings of the questionnaire and to see how best the results can benefit their school.

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Appendices

Introductory letter
Information sheet
Questionnaire