
The Role of Specialized Schools for Students with Visual Impairments in the Continuum of Placement Options: The Right Help, at the Right Time, in the Right Place

Eugene McMahan

Structured abstract: *Introduction:* This study examined the current role of specialized schools for students with visual impairments and compares these results to a 1994 study. *Methods:* Two surveys were used to gather data from specialized schools that were members of the Council of Schools for the Blind (COSB). The first survey gathered information about current enrollment in K-12, preschool, early intervention, and postgraduate programs. Data were also obtained from an ongoing longitudinal study of 2007–2012 graduates of specialized schools. *Results:* Enrollment levels at specialized schools were the same as when measured in 1994. The sample had a higher percentage of students with additional disabilities than in the past, but academic programs still played a significant role at these specialized schools, with over 60% of students with visual impairment and no additional disabilities attending college after graduation. The study found that 80% of the specialized schools were involved in outreach activities, with nearly 50% providing direct instructional services to students attending school in general education environments. Specialized schools also provided consultations and in-service training sessions to educators who work in general education environments. *Discussion:* The study shows that specialized schools continue to provide an essential placement option for some students with visual impairments at some time during their primary and secondary education. The majority of students at specialized schools have additional disabilities, but these schools continue to provide successful academic programs for the students who need them. Furthermore, the study shows that many of the specialized schools are involved in providing direct and indirect services to students being educated in general education environments. The continuum of placement options differs according to state. These differences result in varying degrees of involvement by specialized schools in the general education environment. It is critically important to ensure the continuum in each state affords every visually

impaired child an appropriate education, although the location in which educational services are rendered may change with the needs of the student during his or her schooling.

The education of children with visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision) in the United States began with the establishment of three residential schools for students with visual impairments that were erected between 1829 and 1832. The schools were located in what were then rural parts of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and students lived at the schools during the school year. Prior to the establishment of these schools, children with visual impairments were either cared for in the home of a relative or sent to an almshouse, and they were rarely offered any education (Freeberg, 2002).

In the course of the next 100 years, residential schools for students with visual impairments were established in many states. As populations increased around these schools, many of the schools began enrolling local students who would attend school each day and then go home to their families each afternoon. Such schools are now commonly referred to as specialized schools for students with visual impairments rather than as residential schools.

Prior to the 1950s, the vast majority of students with visual impairments were educated at specialized schools. In a few locations around the United States, such students were able to attend general education classes. However, it wasn't until the middle of the 1950s that this became a common practice in school districts around the country (Castellano, 2005). Students could then be educated alongside nondisabled peers with the support of local teachers who were

specifically trained to teach students with visual impairments in itinerant, resource, or consultative models of service delivery.

The most significant change in the education of students with disabilities in the United States occurred in 1975, with the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children's Act (1975). This law guaranteed all children with disabilities the right to free public education. It also mandated that education take place in the least restrictive environment that could afford a child an appropriate education. The wording of the act anticipated that placement would differ based on the educational needs of the child. Therefore, accompanying regulations required all states to provide a continuum of placement options to ensure that appropriate options for education were available to all students with disabilities.

This legislation changed the options that were available to students with visual impairments. With supplemental supports, the majority of students with visual impairments could be educated in public school environments, mainly in general education classes. According to the 31st Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), almost 90% of students with visual impairments were educated in general education classrooms in 2008.

All placement options have advantages and disadvantages. It is incumbent on local educational agencies to match the child's needs to the placement that will afford that child an appropriate education. Some advantages specifically related to

students in specialized schools are that students have more role models, that they feel relief from a sense of difference from sighted peers, and that they have more meaningful opportunities to participate in student leadership activities and competitive sports. Faculty and staff members in specialized schools are specifically trained to meet the needs of children with visual impairments. Specialized schools have the facilities and focus to address vision-specific instructional needs (Baker, 1982; Erin, 2007).

Some disadvantages of specialized schools are that students often need to travel long distances to attend such schools and that those who reside at the schools are away from their families during the school week. Although many specialized schools offer their students the opportunity to receive some instruction in local public schools, students enrolled at specialized schools generally have less contact with nondisabled peers than do those who attend public schools full-time. The range of instructional offerings is often narrower in specialized schools. (Baker, 1982; Erin, 2007).

The purpose of the study presented here is to provide information about the current role of specialized schools for students with visual impairments within the continuum of placement options by identifying characteristics of the students educated at specialized schools and describing the work done with students and staff members working in general education settings. Although there is reference made to the previous study (McMahon, 1994), this article is not meant to be a replication of that study. Some of the information collected in the current study can be compared to the past study, but new information was

also collected, particularly as related to the specialized schools' involvement with students and faculty members working in general education settings.

Methods

Data analyzed in the study presented here were obtained through two surveys that were accessed by respondents through an online SurveyMonkey form. The first, Survey 1, was conducted in 2013. It gathered information about services offered by the specialized school to students enrolled in general education environments as well as information about students enrolled at specialized schools. After a review of the literature, a draft form of the survey was provided to members of the Board of Directors of the Council of Schools and Services for the Blind (COSB). After modifications of the form based on the input of the Board were made, the final version was completed.

Survey 2 provided additional data from an ongoing longitudinal study of graduates of specialized schools. At the end of each school year, respondents to survey 2 also used a SurveyMonkey form to enter data. The dataset used in the study contained the sample of students who graduated from specialized schools from school years 2007 through 2012. *Graduates* were defined as students who completed their last year of educational eligibility at a specialized school. Graduates included students who completed requirements for academic diplomas, as well as students who were in life-skills programs. A number of drafts of the survey form were distributed to superintendents of COSB. After a review of suggested modifications, the final version of the survey was completed.

INSTRUMENTS

The first set of questions on Survey 1 gathered information about the types of services the specialized school offered to students in general education environments. It also gathered information about the school's involvement in other blindness education-related areas such as preservice education, inservice education, evaluation services, and research. The second set of questions gathered information about enrollment in four types of programs. Included are traditional K-12 programs and postgraduation programs. Enrollment data were also collected for programs serving preschool students aged 3 to 5 and early intervention candidates from birth to age 3. These programs could be located either at a school or in a natural setting, such as the child's home, child care center, or playground. There was an overlap in age 3 between preschool and early intervention. Respondents were told to report 3-year-olds according to the funding source that was being used to provide services. For the purposes of this paper, findings on the postgraduate programs are not included.

Survey 2 collected information from students who graduated from specialized schools. The survey consisted of 27 questions detailing demographic and learning characteristics of the students, instructional activities in the last two years of schooling, outcome data, and parent satisfaction data that focused on the expanded core curriculum.

PARTICIPANTS

For Survey 1, superintendents of specialized schools received an e-mail explaining the project and asking them to complete the online survey. COSB membership in 2013

included 44 members. Of that number, only 39 specialized schools provided direct educational services to children at their school. The first eight questions of Survey 1 addressed outreach services. Thirty-one of the 39 specialized schools completed this section for an 80% response rate. Twenty-six of those schools also completed the questions related to enrollment at their school for a response rate of 67%.

Survey 2 collected student learning characteristics and educational outcomes at the time of graduation from COSB schools. For school years 2007 through 2012 there were 947 graduates in the dataset. Not all schools participated in the survey every year. The average number of specialized schools that participated each year was 18.

Results

SURVEY 1

The initial questions in Survey 1 addressed the general characteristics of specialized schools. Seventy-seven percent of the schools reported that they were "state schools," meaning they were state government entities. The rest were non-governmental private schools. The specialized schools were then asked to identify the location in which their services were delivered. Ninety percent of the schools reported that they provided direct services at their school in addition to outreach services. Only 10% of the schools did not provide outreach services.

Direct services are educational services that are provided directly to students, as opposed to indirect services, which are described in the next paragraph. The types of direct services and the percentages of specialized schools providing

Table 1
Direct services provided to students in general education environments by specialized schools.

Type of instruction	<i>n</i> (%)
Itinerant teacher of students with visual impairments	15 (48.4)
Orientation and mobility	14 (45.2)
Students who are deafblind	7 (22.6)
Assistive technology	15 (48.4)
Weekend or short-stay programs	17 (54.8)

those services are shown in Table 1. Over 80% of specialized schools provided some direct service to students being educated in general education environments. Only 6 of 31 schools did not offer direct services to students in general education environments. Weekend or short-stay programs, instruction given by itinerant teachers of students with visual impairments and orientation and mobility specialists, as well as instruction in assistive technology were provided by roughly half of the specialized schools in the sample.

Indirect itinerant services are not provided directly to students, but rather to staff members who work with students with visual impairments in general education environments. These types of services include consultation and in-service training. Table 2 shows the percentages of

Table 2
Indirect itinerant services provided to students in general education environments by specialized schools.

Service	<i>n</i> (%)
Consultation for teachers of students with visual impairments or administrators	24 (77.4)
O&M consultation	24 (77.4)
Assistive technology consultation	24 (77.4)
In-service training at general education sites	24 (77.4)
In-service training utilizing distance technology	12 (38.7)

Table 3
Evaluation services provided to students in general education environments by specialized schools.

Service	<i>n</i> (%)
Learning media assessment	24 (77.4)
Orientation and mobility	22 (71.0)
Assistive technology	22 (71.0)
Low vision	22 (71.0)
Deafblind	10 (32.3)

specialized schools that provided each of the types of indirect itinerant services.

Eighty-seven percent of specialized schools provided some evaluation services to students who were being educated in general education environments. Table 3 shows the types of evaluations and the percentage of schools that offered each type of evaluation.

Specialized schools were asked to identify the types of preservice student teaching and internship experiences that were available at their schools. Results show that 100% of the schools provided some student teaching or internship opportunities. The types of training experiences and the percentage of schools offering them are shown in Table 4.

Respondents were asked to identify their schools' involvement in research activities. Over 95% of the specialized schools played

Table 4
Specialized schools' involvement in preservice training.

Training or internships	<i>n</i> (%)
Student teacher	29 (93.5)
O&M	22 (71.0)
Psychologist	12 (38.7)
Physical therapy	8 (25.8)
Speech therapy	15 (48.5)
Social work	8 (25.8)
Occupational therapy	13 (41.9)

Table 5
Specialized schools' involvement in research activities.

Research	<i>n</i> (%)
School's teachers or parents are subjects in research projects conducted by universities, foundations, or research centers (including governmental)	24 (77.4)
School is a field test site for adaptive equipment, software, and the like	16 (51.6)
School is a field test site for new curricula to address the needs of students with visual impairments	13 (41.9)

some role in research related to the educational needs of students with visual impairments. Table 5 shows the types of roles and the percentage of schools that participated in research activities.

Twenty-six of the specialized schools provided enrollment counts for their birth to age 3, preschool, and school-age programs. *School-age programs* included kindergarten to grade 12, as well as students in ungraded classes who were eligible to attend school till age 21.

Student characteristics

In the sample, school-age enrollment was 2,843 students. In the 1994 study, a mathematical formula (sample size divided by the percentage of participating specialized schools) was used to infer the total number of school-aged students attending specialized schools. The same methodology was applied to the sample in the current study. Based on this calculation, the estimate of the number of students attending specialized schools in the current study was 4,264.

A breakdown of the 2,843 school-age students showed that 36% of the students had visual impairments and no other disabilities. It also showed that 42% of the

students had intellectual disabilities, and 22% had additional disabilities that did not include intellectual disabilities. Respondents reported that 49% of the students were in academic programs, with the other students in life-skills classes.

Preschool enrollment was 311 students. Of the 311 enrolled preschool students, students with only visual impairments made up 17% of the sample. Children with visual impairments and intellectual disabilities made up 31% of the sample. The majority (52%) of children in the sample had additional disabilities, but no intellectual disabilities. The majority of the children had low vision (77%), and 23% of the sample were reported to be blind. Over half of the children (58%) received their education in specialized schools, while 34% were educated in natural settings. A combination of educational environments was reported for 8% of the children.

Birth to age 3 enrollment was 1,180 students. Of the 1,180 children in the sample, 36% had no additional disabilities. Almost 45% of the children had additional disabilities that did not include intellectual disabilities, while 20% had intellectual disabilities. The majority of these children (64%) also had low vision. The overwhelming number of children (94%) received services in natural settings. Other children received services at specialized schools (5%) or in a combination of natural settings and specialized schools (1%).

SURVEY 2

Data regarding the students who graduated from specialized schools in the years 2007 to 2012 are presented in Table 6. These data are disaggregated to allow

Table 6
Postgraduation placements for students graduating from specialized schools 2007–2012.

Placements	VI		VISD		VIID	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
4-year college	114	30	25	9	0	0
2-year college	127	34	57	21	0	0
Vocational training, blind	45	12	44	16	22	7
Vocational training, generic disability	10	3	11	4	34	11
Vocational training for nondisabled	6	2	8	3	1	0
Full-time competitive employment	15	4	23	9	7	2
Full-time supported employment	7	2	11	4	15	5
Part-time competitive employment	5	1	16	6	10	3
Part-time supported employment	3	1	19	7	36	12
Homemaker	4	1	0	0	2	1
Day-treatment	2	1	9	3	113	37
No placement	37	10	45	17	64	21
Total	375		268		304	

VI = students with only visual impairments; VISD = students with additional disabilities that do not include intellectual disabilities; VIID = students with additional disabilities that do include intellectual disabilities.

comparison by different disability characteristics. The data show that 64% of the students with no additional disabilities graduated and went on to college. Thirty percent of students with additional disabilities other than intellectual disabilities graduated and attended either four- or two-year colleges. Day treatment was the most frequent (37%) placement for students with intellectual disabilities followed by vocational training at 10%. (Vocational training included training that was specifically created for people who are blind as well as that for individuals with any form of disability.) Twenty-one percent of these students left school with no post-secondary education, vocational training, or employment placement.

Discussion

This study provides a snapshot of the activities and number of students attending specialized schools and compares these findings to a similar study conducted 20 years

ago. It provides information about the current role of specialized schools and shows to what extent that role has changed since 1994.

SCHOOL-AGE PROGRAM

Examining the number of students enrolled in specialized schools, the data show that the current number of students is estimated to be at about the same level as in Study 1. The estimate of the number of students attending specialized schools in the current study was 4,264. The estimate from 1994 of the total number of students enrolled in such schools was 3,907.

The disability profile of students who receive services from specialized schools has changed since 1994. In the current study, 36% of students had visual impairments and no other disabilities. This number is lower than the 42% that was reported in 1994. In the current study, 42% of the students also had intellectual disabilities, and

21% of the students had additional disabilities that did not include intellectual disabilities. This level of disability disaggregation was not examined in 1994, so there can be no comparison.

Respondents reported that almost 50% of students were in academic as opposed to life-skills programs. This number suggests that there were students with additional disabilities in the academic curricula. Upon graduation, 64% of the students with only visual impairments in the current study went on to college, while according to the 1994 dataset, fewer than 40% of the graduates went on to college. The data also show that 30% of students with additional disabilities that do not include intellectual disabilities also went on to college. These findings show that although the enrollment of specialized schools consists of a higher percentage of students with additional disabilities, academic programs that lead to college admission remain an important component for these schools.

The data show that for students with only visual impairments, college followed by vocational training were the two most common postgraduation placements. Ten percent of these students left school without a defined educational or vocational postgraduation placement. This finding is the same as was found in the 1994 study. Placements of students with additional disabilities without intellectual disabilities showed a wider spread of placements, with college and vocational training being the two most common. Seventeen percent of these students left school with no defined placement. Students with intellectual disabilities went most frequently to day treatment placements followed by vocational training. Twenty-one percent of these students left

school with no defined placement. The percentage of students without defined postgraduation placements is comparable to what was found in the 1994 study.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education until age 21. A comparison between the current and the 1994 studies shows on average that students with no additional disabilities who graduated in the years 2007 to 2012 attended school less than one year longer than similar students in the 1994 study. There was no change for students with intellectual disabilities, but there was a two-year shorter average stay for students with additional disabilities without intellectual disabilities. Since students can be eligible for education for up to 17 years, the data show that the role of specialized schools continues to be only one part of the educational experience for most students. Students also spend time accessing education in other educational environments.

BIRTH TO AGE 3 AND PRESCHOOL

Data on birth to age 3 and preschool revealed significant differences between the programs. Birth to age 3 enrollments were much higher (1,180) than for preschool (311). There was a larger percentage of students with additional disabilities in preschool (83%) than in birth to age 3 (65%). The fact that it is harder to identify the presence of some disabilities in students as young as three may account for this difference.

The most significant difference between the programs, however, was in the location in which the students were educated. Almost 60% of students received preschool services at specialized schools.

Almost 94% of the birth to age 3 students received services in natural settings rather than at specialized schools' campuses. One of the primary disadvantages of attending specialized schools is that these schools are often farther away from the students' homes than their local schools are. Parents may be unable or, understandably, reluctant to either drive their young children to specialized schools or to have them spend significant time on school buses to get there. The vast majority of birth to age 3 students received their education in naturalized settings, close to their homes. To have a significant role in the education of students below school age, specialized schools need to be able to offer education in natural settings that are closer to home.

OUTREACH

Perhaps the greatest change in the role of specialized schools is the extent to which they are involved with students in general education settings and the staff members who work with those children. Over 80% of specialized schools reported that they provide some level of service to students in general education environments. Aside from the increased number of schools involved in these outreach activities, the types of involvement are more comprehensive now than they were in 1994. Almost 50% of the schools surveyed indicated they provided direct instruction to students who were educated in general education environments. Specialized schools reported providing extensive consultation services (almost 80%) and conducting in-service training (over 40%) in general education environments. Specialized schools are no longer one point in the continuum of placement options, they

are significant players, with others, in various points along the continuum.

The findings in this study provoke the question, "Why are some specialized schools engaged in outreach activities and others are not?" The answer to this question provides some insight into how outreach actually works for students with visual impairments. It is important to realize that the continuum of placement options is not a rigid entity. Each state is responsible for developing a continuum for its students, and each continuum may be different based on the characteristics of that state. For example, in a somewhat rural state there might be a relatively small number of students with visual impairments spread over a wide area. Most students would be alone in needing services from trained professionals in their own school districts. It would be financially impractical for each school to hire its own vision professionals to serve these students. Therefore, contracting with specialized schools is a practical way for some states to ensure that all students receive essential vision services. Conversely, a large urban school district like New York City—which educates over 1,000 students (NYCED, 2014) with visual impairments in general education environments—has the economy of scale to provide all of those services itself, making the outreach services for public schoolchildren typically offered by specialized schools unnecessary in New York City. The key point is that in each state the continuum that is developed must ensure that every child with visual impairment is able to receive an appropriate education and to acquire the knowledge and skills that allow him or her to be

successful and independent throughout their adult years.

The findings of the current study also identified the significant role that specialized schools play in preservice education of vision professionals and in research. This role is often overlooked and undervalued, since universities play the principal role in these activities.

It is likely for some time to come that there will be students with visual impairments who will need the specialization, intensity, and coordination of services that can only be found in specialized schools. It is also true that an overwhelming majority of those students can receive an appropriate education in a general education environment as long as they have the right supports and services provided by properly trained vision professionals. The challenge is to develop an effective continuum of placement options that continues to respond to the needs of students throughout their school years.

The title of this paper, “The Right Help, at the Right Time, in the Right Place,” was taken from a Scottish publication entitled *Strategic Review of Learning Provisions for Children and Young People with Complex Additional Needs* (Doran, 2012). This title describes the promise of the continuum of placement options for students with visual impairments. The continuum is often describe as a hierarchical pyramid, progressing from more to less restrictive placement options. A different way to envision it is as a music scale with the level of intensity and specialization of services rising and falling based on the students’ needs throughout their school years. This is the conceptualization of the continuum that is necessary if the

correct placement for every child with visual impairment is to be determined.

LIMITATIONS

This paper examined the role of specialized schools within the continuum of placement options. It does not address the quality of education in any of the placement options. *Quality* relates to the effective execution of such things as assessment, curriculum, credentials and experience of professional staff members, and the availability of adaptive technology. No data were collected about the quality of the education at specialized schools, and therefore no conclusions can be made about quality. At the time a student’s placement is being discussed, the quality of education among the placement options should be considered.

The samples used in this study are large in comparison to the total number of specialized schools. The sample included large and small schools, state and private schools, and urban and rural schools. Nevertheless, these were not stratified random samples and may not truly represent the population studied.

The data on graduates from specialized schools comes from a large dataset that includes information on students from all specialized schools that belong to COSB. Each year, however, only about half of the schools share information about their students for the dataset. It is possible that some schools only share data when they have what they consider to be good outcomes.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a difference between the role of placement options and the quality of the education that is found in those placements. There is little research looking at the efficacy of various types of

placements for students with visual impairments. An important line of inquiry in the future would be to identify the collection of student learning characteristics that correlate positively with achievement in various types of placements. This information would reduce the amount of inference involved in placement decisions as decision makers try to determine, at any given time, the right services for the right location.

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Eugene McMahon, Ed.D., Limitless Vision Consulting, LLC, 310 Holt Drive, Pearl River, NY 10965; e-mail: <eugenemcmahon@msn.com>.

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