SUMMARY OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to gain knowledge about teaching practices that support the inclusion of children with visual impairment in mainstream primary schools. To this aim the research has identified a number of areas that have implications for development in schools and LEAs.

Firstly, we found that there is a great variation in the participants' definition and understanding of the term inclusion used by school and LEA staff. Indeed, this emerged as a key barrier to the development of inclusive practices in the schools, appeared to be associated with a lack of common purpose amongst staff in schools and is a potential source for confusion. As a response to this we developed a working definition of inclusive teaching as being when:

- The class teacher takes responsibility for the child.
- The child participates in class to the same degree or better, as the average of the other children in the class.
- The child sits so as to be part of the main activity taking place in the lesson.
- Access to the curriculum is facilitated through the use of adapted resources and equipment.
- The learning support assistant (if there is one) works actively to facilitate the child's independence and development; the child should not work in isolation with a learning support assistant for the majority of the time.
- There is evidence of prior planning and discussion of the lesson.

Secondly, we found that participatory teaching methods can help meet the additional social needs of a child with visual impairment, by creating a learning environment that is supportive of children’s social development. This is especially important, given the importance of social encounters in promoting visually impaired children’s cognitive and linguistic as well as social development.

Thirdly, the ways in which the class teacher, learning support assistant and visiting support teacher work together for inclusion is of paramount importance. Where professionals work co-operatively as a team, it appears that there is greater scope for developing effective inclusive teaching practice. This is highlighted as a key area for future staff development. We found that in many of the schools there was a tendency for teachers, learning support assistants and visiting teachers to work independently. Where this individualistic approach existed, it seemed more likely
that the main responsibility for the child, was in effect that of the learning support assistant, rather than the class teacher.

As we move towards an inclusive education system, this inquiry identified a key role for qualified teachers of the visually impaired in facilitating and providing appropriate staff development in schools. This role goes beyond the visual impairment specific staff development that can reasonably be expected currently.

We are also able to throw light on a number of other school or classroom characteristics that appear to facilitate the development of inclusive teaching practices for children with visual impairment; these are where:

- The learning support assistant is viewed as belonging to both the school community and the community of the service.
- There is formal time for the visiting teacher, class teacher and the learning support assistant to plan and share expertise.
- There is a positive can do attitude towards inclusion and the child.
- There is a willingness on the part of the other children to include the child, e.g. non- visually impaired children choosing to learn Braille.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence of this inquiry, we are able to make a number of recommendations to policy makers. Firstly, the developing of inclusive teaching practices within the main classroom is of paramount importance, not only for a child who is visually impaired, but for all children in the room. The variation identified in teachers notions of inclusion, and subsequently of what it means to include a child, highlights the need to define and develop inclusive teaching practices in schools.

Secondly, because teaching styles are known to be difficult to change without support, it is important that teachers and learning support assistants are fully supported and encouraged to adopt methods supportive of inclusion. Measures should be put in place so that appropriate staff development is available, in addition to specific visual impairment related development in the following areas:

- Defining and understanding inclusive teaching.
- Effective use of participatory teaching methods.
- Effective collaboration between the class teacher and learning support assistant.
We strongly suggest that such staff development may be enhanced by enabling the planned sharing of expertise between class teachers, support teachers and learning support assistants within a supportive environment through the provision of formal time-tabled meetings.

In addition, it appears that there is a role for services and particularly for qualified teachers of the visually impaired in providing and facilitating some of the areas for staff development identified above. The role of qualified teachers for the visually impaired in achieving effective inclusion for children with visual impairment should be fully recognised and supported.

Furthermore, through our observations and many discussions with teachers we have been able to identify a number of areas requiring additional, more detailed research. In particularly, further research is needed to:

♦ Develop further our working definition of inclusive teaching practices.
♦ Facilitate, monitor and evaluate initiatives designed to develop the capacity building of teachers in the mainstream by utilising expertise of specialist services for the mainstream and the special education sector.
♦ Evaluate the provision for children with visual impairment in secondary schools.
♦ Understand and improve the organisation and management of the process of transition that takes place as a child with visual impairment moves from primary to secondary school.