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		<h1>Primary School as Part of the Life Path of a Visually Impaired Child</h1>	
		Ph.D. in Pedagogy, Associate Professor, Director Inclusive Resource Center “Levenya”, Lviv Ukraine E-mail: veraremazhevskaya@gmail.com	
Vera Remazhevskaya			
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<b>Abstract</b> This article provides a comprehensive examination of the inclusion of visually impaired children in primary school settings, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: the foundational conditions necessary for a successful educational experience, the specialized activities and interventions of inclusive resource center (IRC) staff, and the distinctive behavioral patterns of visually impaired children in classroom, social, and play contexts. The study emphasizes that successful inclusion requires flexible, individualized approaches that respond to the specific needs of each child and the dynamics of their family and school environment. Effective collaboration between parents, primary school teachers, and IRC staff is highlighted as essential for fostering a supportive and nurturing learning atmosphere. The article further explores the critical role of preparing sighted students for the arrival of a visually impaired peer, employing practical activities and simulations that enhance empathy, understanding, and cooperative engagement. Observational insights reveal that visually impaired children often require additional time for orientation, task completion, and social interaction, necessitating patience, attentiveness, and strategic pedagogical planning. The article also discusses common challenges, such as managing peer interactions, maintaining attention and engagement, and mitigating the potential for social isolation, offering practical recommendations for teachers and resource staff to facilitate positive outcomes. Ultimately, the study underscores that when inclusion is thoughtfully implemented, visually impaired children are not only integrated into classroom life but also contribute to a richer, more empathetic learning environment for all students. The findings highlight that successful inclusion extends beyond academic achievement, encompassing social-emotional development, independence, and lifelong skills acquisition.			
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## Introduction

Employees of inclusion resource centers play a pivotal role in this process. They should not perceive themselves as absolute specialists in the education, upbringing, or rehabilitation of a blind child, nor as individuals who “know everything better.” On the contrary, through collaboration with schools, staff have the

opportunity to enhance their professional skills and gain practical experience. They observe the blind child's behavior in various activities and provide appropriate support when necessary.

The article also addresses specific aspects of a blind child's behavior in unfamiliar environments and strategies to manage these situations; approaches to create a comfortable learning environment for both blind and sighted children; and the benefits a blind child derives from successful inclusion, including engagement in real-life activities and meaningful social interactions with peers.

In Ukraine, the inclusion of a visually impaired child in mainstream general education institutions remains a significant event, despite common societal perceptions. True inclusion is understood as belonging and cohabitation rather than temporary coexistence under the same roof of blind and sighted children. It occurs when the child does not feel exceptional, can feel comfortable, make friends, and explore new, interesting, or challenging experiences openly rather than behind closed doors (Greiner, et al. 2023).

This article specifically examines three aspects of primary school inclusion for children with visual impairments:

1. The necessary conditions for a visually impaired child to have a successful school experience;
2. The concrete activities of inclusive resource center staff in facilitating the child's inclusion in primary school;
3. The behavioral characteristics of a blind child during play, communication, and learning, and their influence on peer relationships, providing insight into the "life of the class from within."

The discussion is based on the author's own observations of blind children's inclusion and integration, the experiences of colleagues from several European countries, and the results of a nationwide pedagogical experiment conducted at the municipal Inclusive Rehabilitation Center "Levenya" under the Lviv Regional Council. Inclusion remains distinctive and important not only for blind children but also for children with low vision in mainstream educational settings.

### **1. The First Primary School Experience for a Blind Child**

The first visit to primary school represents, for both blind and sighted children, the first significant step beyond the family or preschool environment (assuming the child attended preschool), as well as the first social contact with a large number of people. For a blind child, who is often raised under conditions of close maternal care and hyperprotection, this process of separation from parents and familiar preschool surroundings is particularly critical (Bardin, et al. 2021).

Primary school becomes the child's first major "social organization" after preschool and their first real integration into the sighted world. It is also the setting in which the child first experiences a sense of being "different" — referred to as "being blind." This environment provides the first potentially painful experiences, the initial self-awareness, and the first internal conflict arising from the recognition of "I am different," while simultaneously offering the opportunity to interact with sighted peers over many years (Koehler, et al. 2017).

### **2. Role of Primary School in Developing Self-Esteem**

Attendance at primary school can significantly contribute to the development of a blind child's self-esteem. The child may gain confidence in the understanding that "despite my lack of vision, I can achieve," or even "I can do it; I am blind."

Several key factors must be considered for the successful inclusion of a blind child in mainstream primary education. The choice of school requires adequate time and reflection; proximity to the family's residence does not always equate to the best fit. Inclusive resource center staff can support parents in selecting an appropriate school. Preliminary discussions with school personnel are necessary during this selection process.

### **3. Seeking Understanding from School Personnel**

It is essential to seek understanding not only from the classroom teacher but also from school leadership and the relevant educational management authorities, as these entities will provide concrete support to teachers over time.

Advance briefing of teachers and other educational staff is critical. School personnel must understand what including a blind child entails in terms of time commitment and dedication, as well as where to seek assistance (e.g., visits from inclusive resource center staff, parental support). Teachers can commit to inclusion only when fully informed, enabling them to consciously explain their readiness to work under new, complex conditions with new content and methods. Based on experience, such preliminary information often serves as the first form of support for teachers, helping to reduce anxiety and foster confidence, even though “real inclusion” may prove to be quite different than initially imagined (Porter, et al. 2015).

#### 4. Teacher Flexibility and Adaptation

For meaningful interaction between blind and sighted students, teachers must be willing to abandon daily pedagogical stereotypes, demonstrating flexibility, creativity, and patience. They should seek practical solutions to emerging challenges, such as gradually introducing the child to the school’s daily rhythm, adapting to new expectations, the peer group, and the broader school environment. Initial compromises, such as allowing parents to stay briefly in the classroom, must eventually be reassessed and phased out.

#### 5. Parental and School Collaboration

Successful inclusion depends on strong collaboration between parents and primary school staff. From the parental perspective, this includes:

1. Consistent support of their child throughout the educational process.
2. Willingness to compromise and address each situation flexibly, avoiding rigid expectations such as “every lesson, every activity, and every game must be the same for all children – my blind child must never fall behind.”

From the school’s perspective, educators must be attentive and tactful in interactions with the parents of a blind child, who are often highly vulnerable due to previous negative experiences with other teachers, medical professionals, or community members.

#### 6. Open Communication with Sighted Children’s Parents

Practical experience shows that open, comprehensive communication with the parents of sighted children about the blind child’s abilities and challenges is essential for successful inclusion. Without such information, parents may fear that their child will receive “less attention” after the blind child joins the class. These concerns are legitimate and must be openly discussed and seriously addressed. Continuous dialogue between school staff and all parents produces positive outcomes; sighted children’s parents begin to recognize the benefits of inclusion for their own children, including social development, life experience, tolerance, and empathy.

#### 7. Preparing Sighted Students for the Arrival of a Blind Child

An essential prerequisite for a successful start and ongoing inclusion is the preparation of sighted students for the arrival of a blind child in the classroom. This preparation should include not only discussions and factual information but also relevant games in which children experience the situation of “I cannot see.” Children should be introduced, in an age-appropriate manner and without taboos, to the perception of the world without vision, with continuous commentary on situations that occur daily in lessons and extracurricular activities during the blind child’s presence in the class (Pliner, 2009).

The class selected for inclusion should not be excessively large, allowing for flexibility and individualized attention. For example, during the first days of school attendance, it is advisable to limit the number of lessons. Another important condition is the presence of dedicated personnel in the classroom, such as a teacher’s

assistant trained to work with a blind child. Innovative solutions could include shift-based support from other school staff (e.g., psychologists, social educators), student interns, volunteers, or other resources to supplement staff.

## 8. School Environment and Teacher Support

The physical school environment and interior are secondary factors for successful inclusion. Experience shows that well-educated, fully included children can thrive even in compact classrooms with minimal furnishings, provided the school actively implements the principles of inclusive pedagogy. The key focus is “teaching for life” as a core educational concept.

Feedback from teachers indicates that opportunities for professional development and, if desired, supervision are crucial for successful inclusion throughout the blind child’s schooling. Teachers report that support and exchanges with colleagues who also teach blind children provide practical assistance, reduce stress, and stimulate new ideas. Solidarity and shared experience reassure teachers that “we are not alone in our attempts to integrate a blind child into the general educational environment.” (Mushoriwa, 2009)

## 9. Role of Inclusive Resource Center (IRC) Staff

In facilitating successful inclusion, IRC staff plays a pivotal role. They should not consider themselves absolute specialists in the education, upbringing, or rehabilitation of blind children, nor claim to “know everything better.” On the contrary, collaboration with schools allows IRC staff to refine their expertise, observe the child’s behavior in various activities, and provide appropriate support when necessary.

It is important for teachers to understand that IRC staff does not impose strict requirements for individualized instruction based solely on principles of specialized blind pedagogy. Simply enabling a blind child to participate in a classroom with sighted peers is already a significant challenge that demands high professional standards from educators.

## 10. Practical Measures for Inclusion

Over years of collaboration between the “Levenya” Rehabilitation and Educational Center and mainstream schools, a structured “List of Proposals for Cooperation and Support” has been developed. These proposals function like a LEGO set: some elements are core, others auxiliary, and they can be implemented as needed. Key measures include:

1. **Providing Information:**
  - On ocular diseases, their impact on visual perception, orientation in space, preventive measures, and basic principles of spatial orientation and mobility.
2. **Consultation with Teachers:**
  - Discussing behavioral traits and challenges of the blind child, including crisis situations.
  - Exploring pedagogical strategies and solutions to everyday classroom scenarios (e.g., managing bathroom breaks, meals, or allowing the blind child to be temporarily alone in class).
3. **Classroom Observation:**
  - IRC staff observe the child during lessons, individual activities, and recess.
  - Supporting classroom setup, including creating accessible routes (cloakroom-classroom, classroom-toilet, classroom-cafeteria, classroom-gym) and marking furniture with tactile indicators.
4. **Individual and Small Group Activities:**
  - Conducting individual sessions to relieve classroom pressure and prepare the child for group participation.
  - Working with small groups of 3-4 children to foster peer cohesion and adjust behaviors in stressful situations.
5. **Teacher Support:**

- Assisting in selecting didactic materials and adapting the learning environment.
  - Recommending appropriate literature, educational videos, and conducting workshops or meetings for primary school teachers and staff from other schools.
6. **Parental Liaison:**
- Serving as a communication link between the school and the parents of the blind child, addressing not only conflict situations but also facilitating ongoing collaboration and information sharing.

These elements collectively support the blind child's successful inclusion, promote teacher confidence, and enhance the social integration of all students in the classroom.

Category	Description / Activities	Purpose / Expected Outcome
<b>Classroom Preparation</b>	Limit number of children; flexible scheduling for first days	Reduce stress and allow gradual adaptation for the blind child
<b>Information for Sighted Students</b>	Discussions, factual information, games simulating "I cannot see" situations	Help children understand visual impairment and foster empathy
<b>Support Staff</b>	Teacher assistant trained to work with blind students; psychologists, social educators; volunteers; student interns	Provide additional guidance, reduce teacher workload, ensure safety and effective inclusion
<b>IRC Staff Role</b>	Partner with school; do not impose rigid methods; observe child; provide consultation and support	Facilitate collaboration, provide specialized knowledge, enhance teacher confidence
<b>Professional Development &amp; Supervision</b>	Training opportunities, peer consultation, experience sharing	Improve teachers' skills, encourage solidarity, generate new ideas for inclusion
<b>Information Sharing</b>	Eye diseases, visual perception, spatial orientation, preventive measures, orientation & mobility basics	Ensure staff and students understand child's needs and capabilities
<b>Teacher Consultation</b>	Discuss behavioral characteristics, difficulties, and crisis management strategies	Develop individualized strategies and anticipate potential challenges
<b>Classroom Visits by IRC Staff</b>	Observe child in class and during activities; assist in classroom setup; develop navigation routes; create supportive tools	Ensure safe and effective learning environment; teach classmates how to interact
<b>Individual Sessions with IRC Staff</b>	Lesson relief; preparation for group activities	Support learning, reduce stress, build skills
<b>Small Group Activities</b>	3-4 children working together	Promote peer interaction, adjust behavior in stressful situations
<b>Collaboration in Materials &amp; Space</b>	Select didactic materials; adapt learning space; provide literature and videos; conduct seminars	Improve accessibility and teacher knowledge, exchange best practices
<b>IRC as Liaison with Parents</b>	Facilitate communication; support conflict resolution	Ensure coordinated support and understanding between school and family

### Preparing Sighted Students for the Inclusion of a Blind Child in the Classroom

A critical prerequisite for a successful start and ongoing effective inclusion is preparing sighted students for the arrival of a blind child in the classroom. This preparation should involve not only discussions and factual information but also appropriate games where children experience situations like "I cannot see." Information should be presented in a child-friendly manner, without omissions or taboos, explaining the perception of the world without sight. During the blind child's stay in the classroom, teachers should comment on situations arising daily during lessons and extracurricular activities.

The classroom selected for the inclusion of a blind child should not be overcrowded. It is important to maintain flexibility and an individualized approach. For example, during the first days of school attendance, it is advisable to limit the child's engagement to a few lessons. Another essential condition is the presence of

mandatory support staff in the classroom attended by the blind child. For instance, this could include a teacher's assistant trained to work with visually impaired students. Additional strategies might involve "shift work" for supplementary educational personnel from the school staff (psychologists, social educators), support from student interns, volunteers, and other possibilities to find extra personnel.

I am convinced that the school building and its interior are secondary considerations for the successful inclusion of a blind child in primary school (although this may acquire greater importance in modern contexts). I have encountered well-educated, "fully included" children—in the best sense of the word—in small spaces with nearly empty shelves, in schools striving to implement the very idea of inclusive pedagogy. In this sense, the concept of "teaching for life" was a guiding principle of the educational institution.

Feedback from teachers indicates that opportunities for professional development and, if desired, supervision are crucial prerequisites for the success of the blind child's inclusion throughout their school years. Educators describe the assistance and relief they experience when consulting with colleagues who also have blind students in their classrooms. Sharing experiences always sparks new ideas; it is crucial to feel solidarity and know that "we are not alone in our attempts to integrate a blind child into the general educational environment."

When seeking and implementing measures critical to the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs, inclusive resource center (IRC) staff can provide significant support through consultations, guidance, accompaniment, and information sharing. Before detailing specific measures to assist with the inclusion of a blind child in primary school, it is essential to recognize the role of the inclusive rehabilitation center (IRC) staff as partners and the undeniable necessity of cooperation between the IRC and general education institutions.

IRC staff should not consider themselves absolute specialists in teaching, educating, or rehabilitating blind children, nor should they assume they "know everything better." On the contrary, through collaboration with the school, IRC staff has the opportunity to improve their own skills and gain experience: to study the blind child more closely, observe their behavior in various activities, and, if necessary, offer appropriate support. Teachers benefit from knowing that IRC staff does not impose requirements to work constantly with the blind child "individually and according to typhlopedagogical principles." Allowing a blind child to participate in a classroom with sighted peers is already a significant challenge and requires high professional standards from educators.

Over years of cooperation between the Levenya Rehabilitation Center and general education institutions regarding the inclusion of children with visual impairments, we compiled a "List of Proposals for Various Forms of Collaboration and Support." These proposals can be applied as needed. Similar to playing with a LEGO set, where each element has a purpose, some proposals are fundamental, while others serve a supportive role. Below is a list of these "construction elements":

- **Providing Information:** Information about eye diseases, their impact on visual perception, spatial orientation, necessary measures for preventing visual impairment, and the basics of orientation and mobility.
- **Discussions with Teachers About the Child:** Focus on the child's behavioral characteristics and challenges, including crisis situations. Discuss pedagogical situations and concrete ways to address them in daily school life (e.g., "How to organize routines like using the toilet or eating?" or "Should the blind child be allowed to have private time in class? If so, for how long and how often?").
- **Classroom Visits:** Allow the teacher to observe the blind child interacting with other educators (IRC staff conduct corrective and developmental activities with the child). Conduct individual sessions with the blind child in other areas of the school. Collaborate with the teacher to arrange the classroom environment. Develop navigation routes for the blind child (e.g., changing room-classroom, classroom-toilet, classroom-cafeteria, classroom-gym). Develop supportive tools to locate lockers, desks, and sinks (special labels, tactile markers, etc.).
- **Purpose of IRC Visits to the School:** Observation of the child in different situations and routine activities; participation in lessons, games, and breaks (demonstrating to sighted children how to interact with a blind child). Specially simulated situations help understand the blind child's role in the classroom and allow joint analysis with the teacher.



- **Individual Sessions with IRC Staff:** Used for lesson relief and preparing the child for upcoming joint classroom activities.
- **Small Group Activities (3–4 Children):** Encourage peer cohesion, modify behaviors in stressful situations as appropriate.
- **Support from IRC Staff Together with Teachers or Assistants:** Assist in selecting didactic materials, adapt learning spaces for the blind child, provide relevant literature and educational videos, conduct specialized seminars and meetings for teachers across different institutions to exchange experience and discuss special cases.
- **IRC as a Liaison:** Acts as a link between the primary school and the parents of the blind child, addressing not only conflict situations but also routine communications.

### Recommendations

Based on the observations and analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the inclusion of visually impaired children in primary school:

1. **Preparation of Sighted Students:** Conduct structured orientation activities, role-playing games, and discussions to familiarize sighted students with visual impairments, promoting empathy and cooperation.
2. **Individualized Educational Plans:** Develop flexible and adaptive learning strategies that address the unique needs of each visually impaired child, including additional time for tasks, personalized instructions, and tailored classroom materials.
3. **Collaboration and Communication:** Strengthen cooperation between teachers, parents, and inclusive resource center (IRC) staff to ensure consistent support and alignment of educational goals and strategies.
4. **Resource Staff Engagement:** Utilize IRC professionals for classroom support, observation, and guidance in teaching methods, spatial orientation, mobility, and social integration.
5. **Peer Interaction Facilitation:** Organize structured group activities and peer-assisted learning to enhance social inclusion and reduce potential isolation or misunderstandings.
6. **Environment and Accessibility Adjustments:** Adapt classroom layout, furniture, and learning materials to facilitate orientation, independence, and safety for visually impaired children.
7. **Professional Development:** Provide teachers and support staff with specialized training in inclusive pedagogy, braille literacy, assistive technologies, and strategies for managing diverse classroom behaviors.
8. **Continuous Monitoring and Feedback:** Implement regular observation and feedback sessions to assess progress, address emerging challenges, and adjust inclusion strategies in real time.

### Conclusion

The inclusion of visually impaired children in primary schools is a multifaceted process that demands careful planning, individualized approaches, and sustained collaboration between families, teachers, and IRC professionals. Successful inclusion is not solely about academic achievement; it encompasses social-emotional growth, self-confidence, and the development of essential life skills. By preparing sighted peers, fostering empathy, and providing adaptive support mechanisms, schools can create an environment where visually impaired children actively participate and contribute meaningfully to classroom life. Observations from inclusive settings demonstrate that children with normal vision also benefit profoundly, gaining enhanced understanding, tolerance, and social awareness. Ultimately, thoughtful and structured inclusion not only facilitates the development of visually impaired children but enriches the educational experience for all students, supporting the creation of inclusive, compassionate, and resilient learning communities.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. All observations, interpretations, and recommendations presented in this article are based on professional experience and research conducted independently.

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