# ASSOCIATION FOR EDUCATION and REHABILITATION

# of the BLIND and VISUALLY IMPAIRED

**The Role and Training of Teachers of Students with Visual Impairment (TSVIs) as a Special Educator and Why TSVIs Do Not Provide Vision Therapy Services**

**An AER Low Vision Rehabilitation Division Position Paper**

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## Introduction

Across the United States, teachers of students with visual impairments (TSVIs) are receiving referrals for and requests to provide vision therapy services. TSVIs, however, are not trained to provide vision therapy services nor does vision therapy fall within the scope of the TSVI’s professional responsibilities (Topor, Panikkar, Bader, Greer, Kelk, Mogan, Mosbarger, & Snyder, 2014). This paper is meant to provide information to parents, administrators, and other professionals to reduce the confusion about who is eligible for TSVI services and clarify that TSVIs provide educational, not medical, services to students with visual impairments.

## Who is the learner with vision impairment?

Defined under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in accordance with 34 CFR §300.8(c)(13),“visual impairment including blindness means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.”

**Who serves learners who have a visual impairment in the United States?**

According to IDEA (2004), TSVIs are state qualified special education personnel who teach children birth to 22 years old with visual impairment, including those with additional disabilities. TSVIs work across a continuum of placements options, including residential schools for the blind, local education agencies, and the home setting to provide a free and appropriate education. They work in a variety of roles including, specialized itinerant instructor, classroom teacher, to consultant (Spungin & Ferrell, 2007).

## What type of training do TSVIs receive?

TSVIs are prepared in an accredited university program, typically within a college of education. Training focuses on how to provide educational services to children who have a medically diagnosed visual condition that impacts learning. Most TSVI training programs are aligned with the Council for Exceptional Children Blindness and Visual Impairment specialty standard set and are available at the bachelor’s and/or master’s level. Preservice TSVIs complete coursework specific to visual impairment, including classes on the anatomy and function of the eye and visual brain, educational strategies for enhancing use of vision, and braille instruction. Preservice TSVIs complete internships and other field experiences within educational settings under the supervision of a certified TSVI and university supervisor. Upon completion of the training program, preservice TSVIs apply for state certification as a special educator and may be required to take additional state licensure exams related to teaching students with visual impairments. TSVI personnel preparation programs do not train TSVIs in methods of optometric vision therapy.

## What is the TSVI’s role?

### *Eligibility decisions and assessment*

When requested by the family or referred by school staff, an evaluation can be conducted to determine a student’s eligibility for special education services. The eligibility process includes the functional vision assessment (FVA) and learning media assessment (LMA) conducted by a teacher of students with visual impairments. The FVA and LMA are completed to collect data to determine if the visual impairment, even with best spectacle or optical correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The student may also be referred to other education or related service specialists for additional assessments to address other areas of function (Zebehazy, Kamei-Hannan, & Barclay, 2017).

Based on the FVA and LMA evaluation findings, the student may be determined to have a disability that limits the ability to learn and participate in the general education environment but may not be eligible for special education. In such instances, a 504 plan can be instituted to provide modifications or accommodations that enable equal access to general educational programs. When a student is found to be eligible for special education services due to a visual impairment, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) is developed that requires the services of a TSVI. The results of the FVA/LMA, along with input from the IEP team, help establish the extent of services that the TSVI will provide in the ECC areas based on the impact of the visual impairment on learning.

The functional vision and learning media assessment process involves:

* Interpreting *all* medical reports that relate to the child’s visual impairment, such as ophthalmological, optometric, and neurological (Lueck & Dutton, 2015).
* Conducting a functional vision assessment (FVA) to understand how a student/child uses vision under certain conditions and in different environments and during different times of the day (Lueck, 2004; Lueck & Dutton, 2015).
* Completing a learning media assessment (LMA) to determine primary and secondary literacy media (print or braille or combination of the two) and learning methods and materials (Holbrook & McCarthy, & Presley, 2017).
* Providing vision specific assessment within daily routines and activities, including those within the family and community (early childhood) (Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2015, SEC. 636. [20 U.S.C. 1436] Individualized Family Service Plan).
* Providing recommendations for optimizing visual skills as appropriate, in cooperation with other vision professionals such as the ophthalmologist or optometrist, within the educational, home, and community environments towards the development of the IEP, IFSP, or 504 plan (Lueck, 2004).
* Translating FVA/LMA results into educational instruction and adaptations for the use of vision in the home, school, and community setting and selection of literacy media, methods and materials (Lueck, 2004).

### *Special education services from the TSVI*

TSVIs provide special education services to a wide range of children of varying ages and abilities with low vision or blindness. The visual impairment may impact a child’s learning across a range of developmental and subject areas, including the academic and expanded core curricula (ECC). The ECC is a set of disability-specific skills apart from the K-12 academic content that have been identified as being critical for students with visual impairments to learn in order to access the academic core and achieve independence (Corn, Hatlen, Huebner, Ryan, & Siller, 1995; Huebner, Merk-Adam, Stryker, & Wolffe, 2004). The ECC skill areas are: assistive technology, career education, compensatory access, independent living, orientation and mobility, self- determination, sensory efficiency, social interaction, recreation and leisure (Allman & Lewis, 2014). For example, a TSVI may work with a student who has low vision and teach skills that enhance the use of vision, such as visual scanning technique, which fall within the category of sensory efficiency. The TSVI may also provide assistive technology instruction to the student using an optical or electronic magnification system.

The TSVI implements educational plans within the school environment that address one or more of the following areas: (a) instruction in the use of visual strategies to enhance the use of available vision; (b) instruction in compensatory skills to access educational materials and methods; (c) instruction in the use of assistive technology to access educational materials and maximize the use of available vision; (d) intervention methods that promote the development of visual skills and behaviors and their application in functional tasks; or (e) use of sensory substitutions to supplement or take the place of visually based instructional methods.

## What is optometric vision therapy?

Vision therapy is a medical treatment that involves neurosensory and neuromuscular activities individually prescribed, monitored, and provided by an eye care professional. Unlike TSVIs, eye care providers also prescribe and work with lenses, prisms, filters, occluders/eye patches, specialized instruments, visual-motor-sensory integration, and computer vision therapy programs, just to mention but a few, as an integral part of vision therapy (American Optometric Association, 2009). The below list characterizes common practices with vision therapy:

* Medical treatment for vision conditions which include: strabismic and non-strabismic binocular disorders, ocular motility dysfunctions, amblyopia, accommodative disorders, visual-motor integration and visual processing disorders, and visual complications post an acquired brain injury
* Performed in the office of the optometrist under the doctor’s supervision
* Supervised by optometric vision care professionals utilizing many types of specialized and/or medical instruments and equipment
* Prescribed individualized treatment regimen based upon the results of a comprehensive eye examination
* Also known and referred to as developmental vision therapy, behavioral vision therapy, and orthoptic vision therapy

## What type of training do eye care professionals who provide vision therapy services receive?

There are various avenues for eye care professionals to gain training (e.g. medical/optometric courses, clinical practicum, internship, residency, etc.) in optometric vision therapy. Professionals, such as certified optometric vision therapists (COVTs), are trained to work in an eye care professional’s office setting with children for whom non-surgical treatment might be an option to improve their binocular vision skills and visual efficiency (College of Optometrists in Vision Development, 2016).

## Who may conduct optometric vision therapy?

When a student has a prescription/recommendation for vision therapy from an eye care professional, this must be implemented by or under the direct supervision of an optometrist or ophthalmologist, and is not part of an educational program.

Training varies across various programs of study but the list below includes professionals who may provide or be involved in vision therapy services:

* Optometrist
* Ophthalmologist
* Certified para-optometric technician (CPO, CPOA, CPOT)
* Certified optometric vision therapist (COVT)
* Orthoptist

## What options are available for a child who doesn’t qualify for specialized instruction from the TSVI in a school?

* As noted above, based on the FVA/LMA evaluation findings, the student may be determined to have a disability that limits the ability to learn and participate in the general education environment but may not be eligible for special education. In such instances, a 504 plan can be instituted to provide modifications or accommodations that enable equal access to general educational programs.
* Parents can schedule an appointment with an optometrist or ophthalmologist to determine whether the child may benefit from medical treatments. In some cases, the eye care professional may prescribe vision therapy. Because vision therapy is a medical prescription, it is implemented by a medical practitioner under the direction of the optometrist or ophthalmologist, and is not part of an educational program.
* If the child has unmet needs related to literacy, a referral may be made to other specialists, such as a school psychologist or reading specialist, to determine whether the student is eligible for literacy interventions.

## AER Position

Given the role and training of TSVIs, the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired deems that vision therapy is not within their scope of professional responsibilities.

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