**External factors and their effect on the learning of English as a foreign language among visually impaired students**

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Abstract: In this paper we investigate the external factors that influence the learning experience of English as a foreign language among students who are visually impaired (VI). External factors such as family, friends, teachers and school culture were examined among twenty-eight university and college students with VI. Findings show that both behavioral and academic parental and familial expectations, and a stable and caring home setting, fostered participants' psychological and intellectual development, and promoted academic and personal growth. The study also illustrates the importance of friends in making visually impaired individuals more accepted and helping them to be socially as well as academically successful. It was also found that differences in school atmosphere and culture towards inclusion of students with VI acted as a promoting or impeding factor in motivating these students to succeed academically.

**Introduction**

Visual impairment (VI) relates to an injury to the eye or to a neural injury in the visual system which cannot be repaired by visual aids. This impairment limits the individual’s ability to recognize or see details in a sharp and accurate manner from a defined distance. Current literature points out that different factors within the physical environment (technological and navigational aids) trigger responses of anxiety and insecurity among blind and visually impaired individuals (Gustafson-Pearce, Billet, and Cecelja: 2005). In fact, most research thus far has dealt with the immediate physical environment of the visually impaired student. Ahmad (2015) who studied the use of assistive technologies in education for students with diverse learning needs (including blind and visually impaired students) concludes that the educational system and researchers need to develop technological tools and strategies that will assist in the integration of students with disabilities within the general educational system ensuring they receive the same standards and level of instruction as their sighted peers. A review of the literature on second language acquisition for learners with VI reveals a dearth of material. This gap probably arises from the common belief common that learners with VI follow the same patterns of learning as their sighted counterparts, provided that there is a reasonable threshold competence in the first language (Cummins, 1984). On the other hand, some researchers attribute to individuals with VI greater capability for acquiring a second or foreign language. Hence, Morrissey (1931) claimed that blind people are particularly well equipped for foreign languages because their impairment forces them to compensate for their deficiency by developing their other senses, especially their hearing. Further support for this view comes from Nikolic (1986) who claims that blind people have great potential to acquire a foreign language successfully, due to their increased aural sensitivity and intense memory training. Thus, he supports the teaching of foreign language to students with VI within the framework of mainstream education, provided that the instructional material be adapted to their needs.

Conversely, other researchers claim that the differences in the process of foreign language acquisition of the visually impaired and the sighted outweigh the similarities. According to Guinan (1997), individuals with VI have distinct needs which are different from those of their sighted peers, which in turn direct them toward different routes when acquiring a second or a foreign language. She criticizes the oral-aural method in which students get good mastery of the language sound system before being introduced to vocabulary and grammar, since the students do not necessarily master speaking and listening skills before reading and writing. Owing to minimal exposure to the written word, their spelling skill is negatively affected, which is one of the most difficult skills to master, especially in English.

In addition, Muñoz (2004) has observed that children with VI may have great difficulty in acquiring a second language. According to Muñoz, second language instruction in class is primarily visual and is based mostly on sensory exploration, therefore, the information students with VI get is reduced, and may even be limited or distorted. Since they cannot learn a foreign language through exposure and experiences, they have to rely on prior knowledge in order to understand what they hear. Moreover, they have difficulty learning abstract concepts that are taught visually, which may lead to misunderstanding of new concepts.

The present study explored and analyzed the external factors that influence the learning of English as a foreign language and success in academic studies of students with visual impairment, by employing the modified version of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development. Specifically, the study analyzed the following external factors: parents, friends, teachers, and supportive teachers.

**Participants**

Twenty-eight university and college students defined as legally blind, agreed to participate in the study. All participants were in their first year of study. Of the twenty-eight students who took part in the study, nine were men and 19 were women. Seven of the students were completely blind, while the rest were visually impaired. Students ranged in age between 20 and 42.

**Procedure**

This study is a qualitative and the tool used for data collection include interviews. Each interview included three parts:

1. Explanation about the research purpose and design.

2. Personal Details questionnaire – participants were asked to fill in details about their socio-demographic details, description of the impairment (age of onset, visual abilities etc.), educational background etc.

3. The interview - participants were asked to describe their experiences in learning English both in school and as university students with VI. Interviews explored students' past learning experiences; the attitudes of parents and teachers towards them throughout the years; factors that they perceive as contributing to or hindering the learning process, especially in learning English; expectations and experience during their academic studies, such as contact with other students, tutors and lecturers and use of assistive technologies and provision of accommodations. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

**Findings**

The current study set out to examine the process of acquiring English as a foreign language as part of the academic requirements of college and university students in Israel. The analysis included a close examination of the underlying forces in the world of the individual with VI that contribute to the acquisition of higher education and a foreign language. Rotter's (1966) emphasizes external the remote and proximal processes and links in the development of individuals with VI. These external factors contribute to the learning experiences and academic success of individuals with VI. The findings are divided into three themes that influence the learning experience of students with VI and specifically the impact of these themes on the acquisition of English as a foreign language.

**Theme 1: family**

In the present study, the family as a whole, and parents in particular, played a crucial role either in contributing or hindering the learning experiences of the participants with VI. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), the family is part of the Microsystem of the adolescent, and has a vital role in the development and formation of the adolescent's identity, self-esteem and experiences (Bowen, 2010; Kef & Deković, 2004). Thus, some participants with VI associated their academic achievements with their parents' greater involvement in their studies and school experiences. Moreover, these parents often encouraged their children to overcome their disability and had high expectations and aspirations for their children. They often pushed the children towards excellence, and provided them with any additional aid or means in order to advance them in their studies. This was particularly true in the case of English, which was perceived as a significant tool in the child's integration in the academic and real world.

Overall, the interviews indicate that parental and familial expectations both behavioral and academic, the advocacy of skills and efforts as well as providing a stable and caring home setting, fostered some participants' psychological and intellectual development, and promoted academic and personal growth. In their study, Pianta, Nimetz, and Bennett (1997) argued that relationships with adults are important for child development because of their “affordance value,” that is, the extent to which adults bring resources to the relationship to support a child’s intellectual, social, and emotional development that would have otherwise been unavailable. From the various accounts mentioned, family support can be divided into two forms, moral support and practical support. Moral support relates to the values that the family holds toward higher education: parents who value higher education and stress its importance bestow on their children these values during their socialization process, which emphasizes intellectual achievement and learning. Practical support includes various techniques by which family members act in order to help their children to persist in studying: financial support as mentioned above, or technical support in fulfilling learning tasks such as help in reading learning materials, summarizing them and writing papers (Kef & Deković, 2004). The overall picture that arises from the quotes mentioned above illustrates the importance of both moral and practical support in the educational achievements of students with VI.

**Theme 2: Friends as motivators**

It is through interaction with others that people learn and make sense of their world. It is widely accepted that social development plays a crucial role in children’s social and academic development (Roe, 2008). There is a dynamic interaction between these two: improving social competencies not only has a positive impact on interpersonal skills and the quality of interactions children establish, but also on their academic achievement. That is, to be prepared and ready to learn, children need to have healthy social development (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006).

Friendship, defined as a relationship that necessitates mutuality and long-term stability, has important functions in human development, and is a dynamic emotional and cognitive process that changes throughout life (Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007). Friendship provides emotional resources (both for fun and to adapt to stress) and also cognitive resources (for problem solving and knowledge acquisition). It also creates contexts in which basic social skills are acquired and extended (Dunn, 2004). Although friendship plays a crucial role during childhood, it seems to have a significant role also later in life, and specifically in enhancing the chances of academic success. In his model for student retention, Tinto (2006) posited that students who become socially and academically integrated into their campus communities complete college at higher rates than do students who do not integrate. Such social and academic integration has been found to be dependent on a number of influential factors, most notably having satisfying interactions with people in the campus community. This in turn leads to greater integration and commitment to completing their degree, whereas negative interactions tend to promote withdrawal. The concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution were found to be especially important during the first year of college, since it is a year that is marked by different stages of transition (Tinto, 2006).

The examination of the role of integration and patterns of interaction between students with special needs and the environment reveals that children with special needs in regular schools are often less accepted by their peers, have fewer friendships and are less often part of a network in class (Bramston, Bruggerman, & Pretty, 2002; Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000; Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008; Pijl & Frostad, 2010). For children with visual impairment, interaction with others is extremely significant in overcoming some of the visual access limitations they experience and in helping them make connections and develop their understanding of the world (Kef, Hox, & Habekothé, 2000). Research on the social activities of adolescents with visual impairment indicates that they spend significantly more time alone and have more difficulties in making friends than their sighted peers (Huurre, 2000; Kef & Deković, 2004). Some researchers suggested that since youths with visual impairment are often overprotected by family members and service providers, they may not have developed the social skills necessary to integrate into the surrounding, seeing environment, and especially to the academic life (Hodges & Keller, 1999; Klinkosz, Sekowski & Brambring, 2006). Furthermore, individuals with VI may often feel uncomfortable discussing their impairment with their friends. Thus, when they do establish a friendship in which they are comfortable, the role that the impairment plays in that relationship can provide unique challenges for both members of the friendship dyad (Rosenblum, 2000).

The ability to integrate into the social environment was also found to be an essential factor which influences one's integration into the academic system of higher education. Research suggests that college and university students with VI may encounter difficulties in the social – emotional field, since many skills which are necessary for social interaction are based on visual cues. As a result, the lack of visual input makes it hard to recognize actions and emotions of the other and sometime mediation or interpretation is required (George & Duquette, 2006). Moreover, it appears that individuals with VI often receive hostile and inappropriate behavior from their surroundings, which, in turn, leads to fewer social experiences than their sighted peers. Thus, students with visual impairment lack confidence, which is often expressed as being passive, dependent or unwilling to take responsibility. Many of them still suffer from social isolation, fewer friends and inadequate social abilities (Garb, 2000).

In the present study some participants believed that they had age-appropriate friendships in which they were respected. They valued their friends, and attributed their social integration both in class and outside of school to the fact that they had close friends. Compared to parents, friends were less involved in assisting the participants in school. Nonetheless, the ability to form connections with others, especially in academic studies, contributed to their success. Some differences were found with regards to the type of close friends that the participants had. Some had close friends that were also visually-impaired, while others preferred to distance themselves from other visually-impaired individuals, and form close relations with sighted students.

The interviews illustrate the importance of friends in making visually impaired individuals more accepted and helping them to be socially as well as academically successful. As previously mentioned, children need to engage in social interaction so as to maximize their social development. This is particularly true for individuals with vision impairment who often rely on interactions with others in order to overcome some of the visual access limitations they experience and in helping them make connections and develop their understanding of the world (Kef, Hox, & Habekothé, 2000). Thus, the support of peers can have important consequences for student wellbeing.

**Theme 3: School culture towards inclusion and the role of teachers**

School represents a unique system in which children are asked to accomplish multiple intellectual and social tasks. Research indicates that students’ perceptions and sense of belonging to their academic environments is an important factor associated with positive aspects of students’ school-related experiences (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Philosophies regarding the education of children with disabilities have changed dramatically over the past two decades, moving towards implementation of policies which foster the integration and, more recently, inclusion of these students into mainstream environments (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Lindsay, 2007). Inclusion refers to an educational program in which students with disabilities learn alongside their age-appropriate peers in general education classrooms with appropriate aids and services (Gray, 2005). In Israel, there are 1200 pupils with visual impairments, and most of them (1100) are included in the regular education system (Hess, 2010). The inclusion of people with disabilities in the educational mainstream necessitates the identification of the particular conditions that ensure effective inclusion and thus contributes to the empowerment of these pupils.

Several factors that impact the quality of education a child with visual impairment must be taken into consideration in the process of inclusion. One factor is the physical environment of the school (for example, whether or not the environment is easy to navigate and free from obstacles, or whether or not the child's lighting needs are met in the context of a busy classroom). Other factors that have been suggested by researchers include availability of resources and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion as well as school atmosphere and culture (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011).

A school's culture reflects the beliefs, traditions and patterns of values formed over the course of the years. It shapes the way meanings are interpreted and the reasons for setting certain goals, and what affects the school members' behavior and attitudes (Deal & Peterson, 2009). The school climate theory was found suitable for understanding the connection between the characteristics of an inclusive educational system and the success or failure of inclusion (Hess, 2010). Several central elements comprise school climate, among them the presence of a supportive or non-supportive principal figure, cooperation or alienation among staff members, autonomy/non-autonomy in the teacher’s work, and the structural characteristics of the organization. These elements were found to affect educational outcomes and pupils’ adjustment in the academic, social, and personal fields. Studies examining the relationship between the various elements of school culture and inclusion of children with disabilities found a correlation between successful inclusion and various school climate characteristics, such as supportive principal leadership, autonomy, decision-making, cooperation, and prestige of the teaching staff (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002; Roby, 2011).

In the present study, differences in school atmosphere and culture towards inclusion of students with VI acted as a promoting or impeding factor in motivating these students to succeed academically. Moreover, the examination of the various stories and accounts revealed that a successful implementation of governmental policy depended to a large extent on the attitudes of the teachers and principals. Thus, while the government issues policies aimed at the inclusion of students with VI in mainstream classes, the teachers and principals and their attitudes towards inclusion are an important factor in making the inclusion successful.

Another factor that is part of the school system, the relationship that develops between a student and a teacher, and that can be a powerful motivator for learning (Newberry & Davis, 2008). Relationships with teachers may have an impact on students’ learning and academic achievement. In addition, children who are motivated to seek approval from their teachers may employ achievement-related behaviors to meet this goal. Finally, supportive relationships with teachers may enhance students’ motivation to learn and actively participate even in subject domains that have traditionally held little interest for them (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). There is growing evidence that perceptions of support from teachers throughout school also affect psychological adjustment. In an elementary school population, students who reported more positive bonds with their teachers obtained higher scores on self and teacher-reported social and emotional adjustment outcomes (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Teacher support also appears to influence psychological adjustment in older students. Students who attended middle schools that deliberately sought to promote teacher-student relationships tended to have fewer adjustment difﬁculties during the transition (Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2010; Roorda, Koomen*,* Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Other researchers have emphasized the impact of positive teacher relationships on students’ social development, noting that this support assisted in children’s and adolescents’ development of not only academic and behavioral skills but also emotional skills. These ﬁndings suggest that teacher support can help to buffer some of the stress associated with school, offsetting the risk for adjustment difﬁculties (Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

In the case of students with visual impairment, teachers often play a greater role in the social integration and academic success of the students than in that of sighted ones. In school settings, students with VI use different media to access the curriculum, including large print, audio materials, and Braille (George & Duquette, 2006). Making the curriculum accessible to the student with VI is part of the teachers' responsibility, thus making the student with VI dependent on the teacher's guidance and help in class more so than the sighted students. As a result, the attitude of the teacher toward the inclusion of the students with VI in the regular class is extremely important in motivating and encouraging them. Furthermore, teachers' treatment and expectations of the visually-impaired student may contribute to the student's success or failure in class. Namely, teachers who embrace an inclusive philosophy and see beyond the disability often express confidence in the abilities of the visually-impaired student and attempt to capitalize on the learning strength of the student. They may also encourage socialization with peers through the use of cooperative learning strategies (Lee & Shute, 2010). This approach often results in greater social and emotional integration as well as the academic success of the student with VI.

In the present study, the attitudes of the teachers in the general studies, and of the English teachers in particular, played a significant role in the integration of the students with VI in class as well as in contributing to their academic success. Thus, positive attitudes of the teachers and willingness to assist the student with VI often resulted in positive school experiences and greater motivation for learning. On the other hand, negative attitudes in most cases led to feelings of frustration, humiliation and anger toward the teacher and the school as a whole.

**The English teacher**

Despite the growing body of research studies related to teaching English as a foreign or second language for the average learner, there is still a dearth of research addressing the foreign language learning needs of the visually impaired students. This shortage in research is mainly due to the assumption that was common among researchers of second and foreign language acquisition that these students follow the same patterns of learning as their sighted counterparts (Guinan, 1997). That is, provided that there is reasonable competence in the mother tongue, a second language will be learned successfully, as literacy skills transfer across languages. Moreover, some researchers claim that, owing to their superior aural sensitivity and intensive memory training, students with VI tend to be more talented in acquiring a foreign language than average. This assumption was at the basis of most instructional programs for teaching English as a foreign language to students who are visually impaired, in which the main focus was on the acquisition of oral and aural skills (Araluce, 2002).

Other researchers view students with VI as having needs that are quite different from those of their sighted counterparts, and which have been systematically ignored, thus presenting many challenges, to both teachers and students alike (Dursin, 2012). Guinan criticized that oral-aural method for teaching language to students with VI for assuming that the students must master speaking and listening skills before reading and writing. This misplaced emphasis results in little exposure to the written word, leading to reduced reading ability, and specifically to poor spelling (Araluce, 2002). Thus, foreign language acquisition of students with VI is often developed without adequate context, sufficient examples or reinforcement through all the sensory media. Moreover, students with visual impairment are likely to find themselves disregarded and isolated from the foreign language classroom atmosphere (Donley, 2002).

One of the major difficulties the student with VI encounters in learning a foreign language is access to the instructional material. Teaching a foreign language in a segregated setting does not often pose any particular problem, as teachers are qualified in EFL as well as in the education of the visually impaired. The teaching methods, therefore, are carefully adapted to reduce or substitute the visual information of EFL instructional materials. The mainstream system, on the other hand, is a very different matter. Modern language textbooks are highly visual: their colorful, cluttered and confusing layout renders it very difficult to adapt for a visually impaired student (Araluce, 2002; Coşkun, 2013). Hence, in the mainstream system, English teachers who are assigned students with visual impairments need to adapt the teaching materials to the needs of the visually-impaired student, by producing and customizing the teaching materials in Braille or large print (Orsini-Jones, 2009). To do so requires some technological support and training, an investment in time that will pay off in more flexible, individualized instruction. Since teachers do not always receive in-class support, they tend to feel overwhelmed by the extra work necessary to include a visually-impaired student in the regular classroom. This, in turn, affects the teacher's attitude toward the student, which plays a role in shaping the quality of the student's motivation and learning experiences (Davis, 2003).

From the interviews it appears that student-teacher relationships greatly influence students’ academic and psychosocial functioning. A growing body of literature has documented the role that students’ feelings of belonging and the quality of their relationships inside the classroom has on the learning environment. Studies have found that supportive teacher–student relationships are correlated with higher school-related functioning, emotional competencies, and the motivation to succeed (Davis, 2001, 2003; Newberry & Davis, 2008; Murray & Pianta, 2007; Lessard, Poirier & Fortin, 2010). Moreover, early teacher–child relationships tend to predict academic and behavioral outcomes for students up through junior high school. Findings indicate that teachers who are emotionally attentive and responsive to the needs of their students may have greater impact on students' academic performance than the specific kinds of instructional methods chosen (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008).

The influence of supportive teacher-student relations is particularly apparent during English lessons in university and college. Unlike courses in general studies, the English courses are more personal, and consist of smaller groups. In addition, learning a foreign language often brings to the surface the difficulties that students with VI face while learning in a higher education institution. Hence, when interviewed, most English teachers stated they fully understand the special needs of the visually-impaired students, and are willing to provide all the necessary accommodations in order to encourage the students and contribute to their academic success. The English teachers explained that while in general studies, students with VI can rely almost entirely on the auditory mode in order to learn, and explanations provided in Hebrew (their mother tongue) are easier to understand, such an approach in many cases is impractical in learning English. Since most students with VI have a rather limited knowledge of English and a low level of vocabulary, relying on the auditory medium for explaining the material is problematic, thus requiring the teachers to find other modes of communication and teaching.

In addition, some colleges offer an individualized English course, a format that is not offered for courses in general studies. The course is offered only when the student declares that attending the mainstream class during English lessons is too difficult to handle, and this statement is backed by the teacher's assessments.

**The supportive teacher**

The inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms without appropriate support may make students with special needs vulnerable to social or academic failure. In response to these concerns, employing paraprofessionals in inclusive settings has become the prevalent practice (Forster & Holbrook, 2005). In Israel, these paraprofessionals are known as supportive teachers. A supportive teacher is a teacher that is assigned by the Ministry of Education to supervise the inclusion of students with visual impairment into the mainstream educational system (Ministry of Education Guidelines, 2002). According to the Ministry of Education guidelines, a supportive teacher has been professionally trained to teach students with visual impairment or blindness. The main goal of a supportive teacher is to provide students with VI with the ability to handle learning tasks autonomously, participate in social interactions, and develop interpersonal normative relationships. Moreover, the supportive teacher should assist the teachers and parents in providing the necessary adjustment according to the child's specific needs.

There is general agreement among researchers that the role of the supportive teacher has evolved far beyond that of clerical or administrative support for teachers or supervision of students (Lewis & McKenzie, 2009), becoming more instructional and tied to direct support for families as well. Despite the overall assistance a supportive teacher provides both to the visually impaired student and the teachers, some researchers have suggested that it might also lead to counterproductive consequences such as compromised self-esteem and heightened dependence on adult assistance (Conroy, 2008; ‏McKenzie & Lewis, 2008).

The interviews highlight an important aspect that should to be taken into consideration when assigning supportive teachers to children with disabilities, and specifically to those with visual impairment. The presence of the supportive teacher in the classroom emphasizes the difference between the visually-impaired child and the other students in the class, signaling his or her special needs. Unlike other children, the visually-impaired child has to deal with constant attention of the supportive teacher, an attention that could also be detrimental especially in terms of social interaction with other classmates. An additional problematic aspect raised by the participants is the fact that many of supportive teachers assigned lacked professional training for helping students with VI. Although the guidelines by the Ministry of Education specifically state that "a supportive teacher has been professionally trained to teach students with visual impairment or blindness", most supportive teachers assigned to students with VI do not have sufficient training to teach and assist them.

**Limitations**

This study consists of a small number of participants due primarily to the small number of students who are visually impaired within the high-educational system in Israel. The study involved students with VI from Israel who face different hurdles which are not necessarily those experienced by their counterparts around the world. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of students who are visually impaired. In addition, the subjects included more females than males which is not representative of the larger population. And although this study provides a good initial picture of the external factors impacting the learning of English among students who are visually impaired in Israel, a broader set of measures might have provided additional insight into the students’ experience.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This study examined the effect of external factors on the learning of English as a foreign language among visually impaired students in Israel. In particular, it investigated the impact of the immediate environment of the VI students such as family, friends, school and teachers on the ability to acquire a foreign language. The results are based on college and university students’ reports on these aspects in their lives.

Findings indicated that teachers, either regular classroom, English or supportive, play a crucial role in either contributing to or impeding learning among students with VI. The attitudes of the general studies teachers, and English teachers in particular, played a significant role in the inclusion of the students with VI in class as well as in contributing to their academic success. Thus, positive attitudes of the teachers and willingness to help and assist the student with VI often resulted in positive school experiences and greater motivation for learning. On the other hand, negative attitudes in most cases led to students’ feelings of frustration, humiliation and anger toward the teacher and the school as a whole.

It should be noted that in school, students with VI are distinguished from their sighted peers in two aspects. Students with VI have to deal with a larger number of teachers than their sighted peers. Each student with VI is assigned a supportive teacher in addition to the regular teachers in their school, who may change every two years. Another factor that distinguishes students with VI from their sighted friends is the almost complete dependency of the student on the teachers. Since students with VI are limited in terms of accessing class materials, unlike their sighted peers, these students rely almost entirely on the various teachers to make the material accessible.

Research emphasized the association between teacher-student relationships and students’ engagement and involvement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oor, 2011). Specifically, studies pointed to the effect that teachers' expectations and treatment of the visually-impaired student have on the student's success or failure in class. Namely, teachers who embrace an inclusive philosophy and see beyond the disability often express confidence in the abilities of the visually-impaired student and attempt to capitalize on the learning strength of the student (George & Duquette, 2006). Moreover, in order to facilitate the successful inclusion of students with VI, teachers must exhibit flexibility in teaching methods and have positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and the inclusion of such students into regular classes (Sharma, Moore, Furlonger, Smyth King, Kaye, & Constantinou, 2010). This approach often results in greater social and emotional integration as well as the academic success of the student with VI.

With regard to the role of the supportive teacher, results suggested that supportive teachers carry even greater weight than regular classroom teachers in the academic success or failure of students with VI. First, the presence of a supportive teacher publicly declares the fact that the student is different from others. It also very often prevents the other students from attempting to connect and socialize with the student with VI. Some participants stated that sighted students felt that approaching the student with VI is unnecessary, for they already have the aid they need. Supportive teachers presented an additional external relationship that students with VI have, as opposed to their sighted peers. The interaction between the student with VI and the supportive teacher is a very close, one-to-one relationship, as they spend many hours a week together in class. Therefore, in order for this relationship to be effective and lead to academic success, the two sides must be compatible both personally and professionally. That is, the student and the supportive teacher must develop good interpersonal relations, and the teacher must be able to in fact help in the studies, by having appropriate knowledge and expertise.

Theoretically, a supportive teacher is a teacher that is assigned by the Ministry of Education to supervise the inclusion of students with VI into the mainstream educational system (Ministry of Education Guidelines, 2002). In reality, the supportive teacher functions as a mediator between the teacher, school and classmates and the student with VI. The relationship of the supportive teacher with the student with VI as well as with the other elements in the environment may promote or discourage the student's learning. Hence, a supportive teacher that has a positive and encouraging attitude towards the student with VI, as well as a friendly and cooperative approach to the teachers can facilitate successful relationships across the board. Research suggests that similar to the regular classroom teacher, a supportive teacher should adopt a positive attitude towards inclusion as well as adaptability by assisting the regular classroom teacher with specific teaching strategies for the student, ensuring that resources needed by the student are available in time, and promoting amiable working relationships with both the teacher and the student (Sharma et al., 2010).

On the other hand, a supportive teacher that lacks interpersonal compatibility with either the student with VI or the school environment can create conditions that cause clashes between the student with VI and the school, teachers and classmates. The role of the supportive teacher as depicted by the participants can be illustrated in the following figure:

Teachers

School

Classmates

Supportive teacher

Student with VI

Figure 3. Interaction between school environment and student with VI

The figure presents a reciprocal interaction between the supportive teacher, the student and the environment. It seems that in addition to giving practical assistance to teachers by providing the necessary adjustments according to the child's specific needs, the supportive teacher serves as the link between the student with VI and the various elements in the school environment. The supportive teacher is often regarded as the means through which social and academic interaction between the student with VI and his or her teachers, classmates and school staff is conducted. This aspect of mediation between the student with VI and the school environment can be either beneficial or harmful depending on the supportive teacher and the student.

A second external factor that was found to be of importance in influencing the learning experiences of students with VI was parents' attitudes and practical and moral support. In the case of individuals with VI, the perceptions and expectations that parents have about visual impairments can have a significant negative effect on the personal and social development of children with VI (Cimarolli & Boerner, 2005). Research indicated that parents of children with VI tend to expect less of them, which may lead to children's lesser accomplishments and slower development. Overprotection, over-assistance, denial, and negative parental attitudes may inhibit visually impaired children's development of initiative, independence, and realization of their abilities. In addition, research has linked the family's cognitive and emotional level of functioning with social and intellectual competence of the children, and it is this system that has the greatest influence on the personal and educational development of the child (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010; George & Duquette, 2006).

In the present study, most parents followed the patterns described in the research literature. It appears that parents of children with VI treat the children differently than they do their sighted children. They are often unable to disregard the disability, and express feelings of anxiety and distress for their children. These perceptions and feelings often pervade their behavior and attitudes towards the children with VI leading to over-protectiveness and over-assistance. The parents regularly attempt to aid and keep their children from any discomforts or obstacles they might encounter due to their impairment, and even lower their expectations for their children. Thus, some participants claimed that despite the practical support provided by their parents, their parents' over-protectiveness and lower expectations, in fact, made the students feel as if their parents didn't really believe in their abilities, and undermined their self-esteem and feelings of competency. This, in turn, had an effect on the motivation for learning and eventually their academic achievements as a whole.

On the other hand, some participants associated their academic achievements with their parents' greater involvement in their studies and school experiences. Moreover, these parents often encouraged their children to overcome their disability and had high expectations and aspirations for their children. They often pushed the children towards excellence, and provided them with any additional aid or means in order to advance them in their studies. This was particularly true in the case of English, where these parents perceived the study of English as a significant tool in the child's integration in the academic and real world.

Following Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development, the development of a person is linked to the context, or environment, in which the person exists; an environment that is made up of nested systems ranging from *micro* to *macro* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to the model, the *Microsystem* includes the relationship that an individual has with people in the immediate environment who participate in the life of the developing person on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. These relationships between the developing individual and his or her immediate environment influence the engagement and interaction in the environment. Examples of such settings are school, closest friends, family, and workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

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