

# **Partially sighted students in regular schools and their sociometric status in relation to the acceptance of their visual impairment**

**Drs. Cornelis W. Breurkens**

Special Psychologist,  
Sensis Onderwijs  
Jan van Cuykdijk 1  
5361 HM Grave  
**The Netherlands**

0031 486 471215

[kbreurkens@sensis.nl](mailto:kbreurkens@sensis.nl)

## **Introduction**

In the Netherlands most of the students with a visual impairment join regular schools. This concerns about 65 %. This percentage applies to all the students with a visual impairment in the age range of 4 – 20 years old. Students with an additional problem like a learning disability, a behavioural problem or an intellectual impairment are included as well.

As in most countries all over the world these students are coached by itinerant teachers who are delegated from special schools for students with a visual impairment, or the schools for the blind and partially sighted children.

It strikes the itinerant teachers that especially the partially sighted students in the secondary schools meet with more problems with their social-emotional well-being, than the blind students or students without a disability. The reason behind all this has never been made clear. Itinerant teachers do have their explanations, prompted by their experiences, but, as far as I know, there has never been any scientific research into this matter. Yet, the need for scientific foundation is clear. Not only to find the reason, but especially to find an answer to the cause of this problem and also to gain insight into the possibilities for prevention and solution.

In every day life it seems that partially sighted students try to hide their partially sightedness (low vision). Especially those students with a partially sightedness which is inconspicuous. Ochoa & Olivarez (1995) researched this topic on a large scale in the nineties of the last century. They discovered that those students who try to hide their handicap or impairment meet with more problems than students who do not. They based this conclusion on research amongst students with learning disabilities. This is also very often a hidden problem. This research showed that these students were hardly accepted by their peer students. The students with the learning disability felt ignored and rejected even. Maybe it is possible to relate this to the students who are partially sighted in an inconspicuous way. Not being accepted by one's peer students has an enormous impact on one's personal development. Especially on one's social emotional development and one's social adaptation in society. For these students school is an important part of their society. Research by van Lieshout & Ferguson (1991) has made this clear. That is the reason why they plead for schools to be well equipped for students, to enable them to grow up in a continuum of social emotional development. From this point of view relations with peer students are important in avoiding social emotional problems and on the other hand they are necessary as a means to attain social skills in relation with one's peer students or with society.

There are several reasons why students who are partially sighted experience problems in this matter. Often it is not possible for them to react adequately to social signals. Particularly when those signals are non-verbal. In our society which is very visually orientated our students run great risks. Research by McGaha & Farran (2001) showed that young people need particular behavioural or social skills in order to react adequately to social signals coming from their environment.

Because we feel very responsible for the well being of all our blind and partially sighted students, we feel obliged to help them in solving this problem.

To find out what might be a possible reason for this problem, I did some research to find out whether there is a relation between the acceptance of the visual impairment and the socio-metric status of our students.

I want to explain the method of my research and the results I found.

## **Method**

### *population (participants)*

The population consist of 756 students in the age range of 12 – 16 years old. In this group we had 30 students who are partially sighted and 726 peer students (class mates) who are not. For this research 80 partially sighted students were asked to join in this investigation and at least 32 students were willing to do so. This is only 40 % and from those 32 we were able to use the results of 30 students and their class mates.

### *instruments*

To find out what causes the social emotional problems we investigated whether there is a probable reason in their development that causes this. One probable cause could be the acceptance of the visual impairment. That is why I first wanted to find out if there is any problem in accepting the visual impairment amongst those students. To find out if this is really a problem for them, I used the AGAS as an instrument. AGAS is the abbreviation of Algemene Gehandicapten Attitude Schaal, which I can translate into: General Handicap Attitude Scale. This is an instrument for investigation developed by a Dutch psychologist, whose name is Toos Buijk.

She wanted to have a trustworthy means in preventing problems experienced by people with a handicap or impairment at the beginning, during and at the end of a period of rehabilitation. It was developed for all kind of impairments and needed only a little adaptation for students with a visual impairment. This instrument consists of 36 allegations, divided into four scales or factors:

<i>assimilation:</i>	the degree in which the student has accepted his impairment.
<i>help-independence:</i>	the degree in which the student finds it disturbing to depend on help.
<i>social consequences:</i>	the degree in which the student experiences an attitude of incomprehension with regard to people with an impairment by people without an impairment.
<i>bottom (psychological substratum):</i>	the degree in which there is a positive emotional disposition with reference to the acceptance of life with an impairment.

For every allegation there is a possible score from 1 – 5. To find out whether all items have a positive contribution to the reliability, I did four reliability analyses, by Cronbach's Alpha. All items were positive [assimilation  $\alpha = .8939$ ; help-independence  $\alpha = .857$ ; social consequences  $\alpha = .7908$ ; bottom (psychological substratum)  $\alpha = .8712$ ]

In 1985 I did research, together with a colleague, with the same instrument. We wanted to compare the acceptance of the visual impairment amongst students in the same age range in special schools for the partially sighted children and in regular schools. We found out that the acceptance of the impairment for all the students was not a big problem. We found out that the acceptance amongst the students of the special schools was greater, although not significantly, than amongst the students of the regular schools.

Now, twenty years later, I did the same research, but now only amongst the students in the regular schools. We found out that the acceptance is almost the same as 20 years ago.

However this research was part of a research with another intention. Among the students who joined this study we also did some research into their socio metric status amongst their class mates.

By making a sociogram we used the nomination procedure. The class mates were not told about the goal of answering the questionnaire. They were not told that the results of this research would be used anonymously to compare them with the results of the research into the acceptance of the handicap by their partially sighted class mate. The mentor of the class used the results of this sociogram as a part of his support for the group in a so called study-mentor hour, which is part of a school programme in secondary schools in the Netherlands.

The questionnaire that all the classmates (the partially sighted student as well) had to fill in consists of ten questions. All participants were asked to fill in three names of their class mates. They had to answer the following questions:

1. Mention the name of the student you would like to sit next to in class.
2. With whom would you like to work on a project?
3. With whom would you like to share your sorrow with?
4. With whom would you like to drink something during the break?
5. With whom would you like to share your hobby?

In the following five questions the students were asked to fill in three names of class mates with whom they would not like to do this.

Cillissen & ten Brink (1991) tell us that in using this way of research we can make five status groups by changing the results in standard scores. Here we used percentile scores as standard scores.

According to this we made five standard groups:

1. **popular:** a positive score of more than 80% and a negative score of less than 20% (positive - high and negative -low)
2. **rejected:** a positive score of less than 20% and a negative score of more than 80%. (positive - low and negative - high)
3. **ignored:** a positive score of less than 40% and a negative score of less than 40%. (positive - low and negative - low)
4. **controversial:** a positive score of more than 80% and a negative score of more than 20 %. (positive - high and negative - mean) or a positive score of more than 20% and a negative score of more than 80%. (positive - mean an negative - high)

5. **inconspicuous**: an inconspicuous positive score and an inconspicuous negative score. (positive – mean and negative – mean)

#### *procedure*

I approached the participants, not directly, but with the help of the itinerant teacher. That is the way we need to do this in the Netherlands, because of people's privacy.

So I was not able to have any contact with the students. The disadvantage is that I had no influence in making them convinced of joining this research. Perhaps that is the reason that only 40% of the students joined the project.

The itinerant teacher gave the visually impaired student the questionnaire of the AGAS and the mentor the questionnaire for the sociometric status. The visually impaired student filled the AGAS in independently. The mentor used one of his lessons to make the students fill in the questionnaire for the sociometric status. I received the lists by mail or via the itinerant teacher.

#### **Results**

The results of the research into the acceptance of the impairment showed us that the students have an average acceptance of the fact that they are partially sighted. If we look at the results very strictly, we see that their score is a little bit more positive than average. This may take us to the careful conclusion that the students do not have big problems with the acceptance of the fact that they are partially sighted. This is the same conclusion as from the research dating from 1985. (Breurkens & van Dooren)

The results of the research for the sociometric status show us that the class mates without an impairment have very high scores in the categories 'controversial' and 'inconspicuous'. It is remarkable that the group of students with a visual impairment also has a high score in both categories. However it is remarkable that the students with a visual impairment do not have any score in the categories 'popular' and 'ignored', whereas the not impaired classmates in these categories have low scores. The difference in all scores is not significant. This makes it possible for us to draw the cautious conclusion that the sociometric status of students with a visual impairment does not deviate from the sociometric status of their class mates without visual impairment.

To discover whether there is any relation between the acceptance of the visual impairment and the sociometric status we used all scores on all factors of the AGAS. As far as the socio metric status is concerned we used a recode in three groups in which the students with a visual impairment scored. (inconspicuous, controversial and rejected)

To find a relation we had to use the CHI-quadrante test. Because of the oblique division of the scores of the AGAS and the small groups we chose the non-parametric variance, the Kruskal & Wallis test. The zero hypothesis was that the average of ranking numbers of the three status groups were equal. This means that there is no relation between the acceptance of the impairment and the sociometric status. The alternative hypothesis was that not all ranking numbers are equal. This means that there is a relation between the both of them.

The result is that the zero hypothesis can not be rejected. There is no significant relation between the acceptance of the visual impairment and the sociometric status. In spite of this fact, it is possible to say that there has been found a certain relation between the factor '*social consequences*' and the socio metric status. Although this relation is not significant ( $p=.10$ ) while the other three factors have a significance level of  $p = .56$  for assimilation,  $p = .86$  for help-independence and  $p = .62$  for bottom (psychological substratum)

We may conclude, if not carefully, that students with a visual impairment who have problems with the social consequences of their partially sightedness will have a more deviate social status.

### **Discussion:**

Research showed us that the sociometric status of partially sighted children is not influenced by handicap acceptance. Moreover we found out that the sociometric status of partially sighted students is not deviating from the status of their peer students who are not partially sighted. That is why we are allowed to draw the careful conclusion that inclusion of our partially sighted students is a good thing to do.

This does not mean that they do not experience any problems. It seems that their problems are not very much different from the problems of the peer students without an impairment. Nevertheless we feel responsible to find a solution for the problems they experienced.

Research of Peavy & Leff (2002) showed that limited social skills may lead to a certain sociometric status. In their research they made clear that social skills have a favourable influence on the sociometric status. This means that, in order to prevent any social emotional problems, it is wise to teach our students good social skills.

In her lecture during the European ICEVI-conference of 2005 in Chemnitz, our special psychologist Sytske Brandenburg showed that good social competence of students with a visual impairment, is basic for their self-esteem. She told us that it is our duty to teach our partially sighted students in such a way that they can develop their social skills to the best of their being. She pleads in favour of tuning our policy in that direction. Her point of

view is to find out what risks are most likely to occur for our students. Lang (2000) announced that there is a great spread of risk factors and we must not think about individual problems, but we have to think of an overall spread of risk factors. We have to tune the way of living, the way of education and of coaching to these students. How can we find out what risk factors our students encounter, in order to tune them to the most frequently asked questions of students with the same problems. One of the most occurring risk factors is the awareness of the impairment. Assistance is confronted with this awareness. Especially in the denial and rejection of low vision aids. The question at stake is: What answers do we have? In our institute, Sensus, we are developing a way of coaching to help solve this problem. We try to do this in two ways. One way is the processing and the other way is the implementation. In the processing we want to find out what the exact problem is, we want to analyse this problem and we try to find a solution. In the implementation we want to develop possibilities to find a solution for this problem. This is the process in which we are involved at this moment. In a next conference we hope, with the help of the reactions of other ICEVI-members, to give you more details and insight to possible solutions.

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