Compensatory or Functional Academic Skills

These are skills needed to access the regular curriculum presented in the regular classroom (i.e., compensatory skills), skills needed by students with multiple disabilities to enhance their ability to participate in home (i.e., functional skills), school and community, and an array of communication skills. “Communication needs of students with visual impairments will vary depending on the degree of functional vision, the effects of additional disabilities and the task to be done. Students may communicate through braille, large print, print with the use of optical aids, regular print, tactile books, a calendar system, sign language, recorded materials or combinations of these means.” (Hatlen, 1996)

Examples of other compensatory or functional academic skill areas might include concept development, spatial awareness, keyboarding skills, listening skills, organizational skills, use of the abacus, or tactile discrimination skills. The acquisition of everyday concepts and practical knowledge usually acquired through incidental learning by students who are sighted requires specific instruction for students who are blind or visually impaired to ensure they are building their knowledge base on accurate information.

Orientation and Mobility

This is an area of instruction focusing on students’ ability to know where they are in relation to their environment and to travel safely, efficiently, purposefully and independently throughout this environment. Good orientation and mobility skills are highly correlated with the degree of independence achieved by students later in life. Developing body awareness, directionality, spatial awareness and practical knowledge associated with the characteristics of a given environment increases the probability that students will be actively involved in age-appropriate activities with peers. Problem solving strategies essential to travel in both familiar and unfamiliar environments, urban and rural areas and in various kinds of weather are essential to the development of independence and self-esteem. Students who have low vision need to learn to interpret both visual and auditory information, and may require optical devices to access information. The use of a white cane is essential for some students who cannot rely upon the accuracy of the
visual information they receive or for those who are blind. Students who are blind or visually impaired with additional disabilities need to have orientation and mobility instruction that addresses the specific needs of their daily routines. Orientation and mobility is taught by professionals who have completed certified programs in this very specialized area.

Social Interaction Skills

These skills are essential if students are to develop friendships with their classmates and participate in activities typically associated with school-age students, whether educational or extracurricular. Having effective interpersonal communication skills is also highly correlated with employability in adults. For students who are sighted, social skills are primarily learned incidentally through interaction with family members and peers. Most of this learning occurs through observation, imitation and incidental experiences that are part of everyday routines. For students who are blind or visually impaired, this information must be provided through timely, insightful, and sequential instruction. Information associated with non-verbal communication (e.g., gestures, body language, facial expressions) or cultural practices (e.g., how close to stand to the person with whom you are speaking) must be made available to students who are blind or visually impaired. Furthermore, peers of students who are blind or visually impaired require specific instruction to increase their awareness of the implications of vision loss on social interaction if they are to become both comfortable in their interactions with their classmate who is blind or visually impaired and knowledgeable about how to include this student.

Self-determination (added in 2004)

This area of the ECC highlights the importance of believing in oneself, while understanding one's abilities and limitations. Students learn from successes and failures how to achieve one's goals in life. Self-determination is the ability for people to control their lives, reach goals they have set and take part fully in the world around them.
Independent Living Skills and Personal Management Skills

These skills are highly correlated with the achievement of lifelong goals for students who are blind or visually impaired. “This area encompasses all the tasks and functions people perform, according to their abilities, in order to live as independently as possible.” (Hatlen, 1996) Curriculum designed to address the development of independent living skills includes instruction in such areas as personal hygiene, food preparation, money and time management, home management, and organization of personal belongings and space to accommodate the lack of visual input. While similar skills may be taught within the public school curriculum, they do not provide sufficient opportunity for the meaningful and frequent practice required for students who are blind or visually impaired. The content of the regular curriculum is often based on the assumption of the presence of a basic level of knowledge acquired incidentally through vision. As with the skills of social interaction, students who are blind or visually impaired cannot learn these skills without direct, sequential instruction by knowledgeable people.

Recreation and Leisure Skills

These skills and experiences provide the same benefits for students who are blind or visually impaired as they do for their peers who are sighted (e.g., healthy lifestyle, fitness, shared peer interests). However, without modifications and/or specific instruction to master prerequisite skills, students who are blind or visually impaired are frequently excluded from such activities. Many of the motor skills learned during the rough and tumble play of childhood activities do not develop naturally in students who are blind or visually impaired. As well, if initial exposure to specific activities is cumbersome or their level of participation or success below that of their peers, students who are blind or visually impaired may become easily discouraged. The provision of specific, timely instruction and opportunities to practice newly acquired skills will ensure students derive pleasure from participation in an array of recreational and leisure activities.

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Career and Life Management Skills

These skills provide students with information about the world of work, career options, and an overview of the skills necessary to be successfully employed. For students who are blind or visually impaired, there are many additional program components which need to be addressed (e.g., accommodations required to complete specific jobs, access to appropriate assistive technology, self-advocacy skills, and those to deal effectively with negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities). Frequently, students who are blind or visually impaired are unaware of the array of career options because they do not see the variety of workers in their environment or because adults around them are uninformed. Employment statistics from both Canada and the United States show that individuals who are blind or visually impaired are both underemployed and have unacceptably high rates of unemployment. Without specific and timely intervention to address career development issues, students who are blind or visually impaired encounter significant barriers to successful employment.

Assistive Technology

This technology enables students to access information, participate in age-appropriate activities, or complete a task independently or with minimal assistance. The term “assistive technology” refers to a broad range of devices, such as video magnifiers (i.e., closed circuit televisions), low vision devices, computers with Braille input/output, Braille embossers, software used to vary print size, large screen monitors, talking calculators, etc. Instruction in the use of assistive technology begins in the preschool years and evolves as the needs of students change. Mastery of assistive technology contributes to the development of literacy and academic success, social interaction among peers, independence and the potential of future employment.
Visual Efficiency Skills

These skills are used to accurately interpret visual information and complete visual tasks as efficiently and effectively as possible. Students’ ability to interpret visual information is affected by many variables (e.g., the type and severity of vision loss, cognitive ability, experiential knowledge and environmental factors, such as lighting). However, with comprehensive, systematic training and practice, most students can learn to use their remaining vision more effectively and efficiently. Visual efficiency training may include blur interpretation, scanning and location skills, strategies to improve visual efficiency (e.g., use of appropriate lighting or wearing tinted lenses to reduce glare), and strategies which enhance a given student’s access to visual information. Students learn about their particular eye condition, its implications on access to visual information, and how to explain their visual needs to others.