

# Enrollment of children in schools for the visually impaired in east Africa.

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## **Abstract:**

Many visually impaired children can learn to read print with appropriate training and simple visual aids. This may allow them to attend normal schools and to be integrated into society, which has lifelong benefits. Yet, in Africa, many visually impaired children are enrolled in special schools and taught only Braille. The purpose of this analysis was to document the extent of inappropriate enrollment of visually impaired children in special schools and annexes for the blind in four African countries. Schools were selected through a population-proportional-to-size method so that they would represent all children attending special schools in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda. Children were examined by ophthalmologists trained in standardised methods to determine visual acuity and the cause of decreased acuity. Of 1062 children examined in special schools and annexes for the blind, 361 (34%, 95% CI 31.2, 36.8) had visual acuity  $\geq 6/60$ ; the most common cause of visual impairment was retinal disease. Of the 120 children with normal vision ( $\geq 6/18$ ), 69 (57.5%) had two normal eyes, 21 (17.5%) had an obvious ocular disfigurement in the fellow eye and 10 (8.4%) had had successful cataract surgery. In these countries, many children are placed inappropriately in special schools and annexes for the blind. The reasons are multiple and to rectify the situation will require advocacy and cooperation between ministries of health and education.