

# **Teachers' experiences of Braille reading students' participation and activity in mainstream settings - a complete survey**

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## **Introducing the project**

During a period of three years, an interdisciplinary research project is carried out at the Institute for Special Needs Education / Resource Centre Vision in Stockholm, Sweden (former Tomtebodas Resource Centre). Members of the research group are Kim de Verdier psychologist, Anders Rönnbäck special teacher and Annica Winberg social worker. The aim of the project is to deepen the knowledge about how a Braille reading student with severe visual impairment can be as included as possible in the teaching situation and in the social life of the classroom. Our project consists of two parts – a questionnaire and a long term case study. This presentation will focus on some of the results from the questionnaire.

## **Background**

In Sweden there are about 3000 registered children with visual impairment. The population is very heterogeneous, and about 70% of the children have additional handicaps, such as cerebral palsy, mental retardation etc. Among the 3000 children with visual impairment, only about 10 – 15 per year become Braille readers. For some of

them Braille will be the main reading and writing medium, and for some of them Braille will be a complement to ink print.

In Sweden the special boarding school for children with visual impairment closed in 1986. Since then the majority of children with visual impairment attend mainstream schools. Most of their teachers attend further education courses at Resource Centre Vision, and they also have the possibility to ask for support from advisors for visually impaired. Thus, we don't have vision teachers in the schools around the country – the regular classroom teachers are expected to meet the Braille reading students' needs, together with the assistance of a support teacher.

When the special boarding school closed, the main concern was how to get a satisfactory pedagogical environment for the Braille reading students in the mainstream schools, and how to find ways to include their different means of reading and writing in the overall teaching. The obvious gain was expected to be increased social contacts for the student with sighted peers, and a larger social network in the home town. Now, 20 years after the closing of the special school – what have we learned? How well have we succeeded with the goal of inclusion?

### **What is inclusion?**

In our project the concept inclusion/included is defined as the child not just being *there* but also experiences themselves as *being participatory and active* in the relationship with others. By participatory and active the child is considered as being involved in the interplay which is characterised by mutuality and exchange, together with other actors - children and adults - in the teaching\_situation. Initiatives for communication interplay and exchange of knowledge must occur both *from* the child himself to others and *to* the child from others.

### **Purpose**

The aim of part study one, the questionnaire, is to find out how the teachers perceive the Braille reading student's participation and activity in the classroom and what factors they find important for successful inclusion. We adopt an interdisciplinary perspective and are interested in the teachers' understanding of how the child's possibilities of being active and participating are influenced by factors as:

- the structure of the learning environment
- the physical environment and the use of technical aids such as computers
- group factors
- the child's individual traits

### **The study group**

The questionnaire was sent to all 82 classroom teachers who teach Braille reading students in grade 2 – 9 in mainstream schools all over Sweden. The students were

chosen because they were all recommended Braille in first grade. Children with severe additional handicaps who attend special teaching groups were not included in the study. The study is a complete investigation.

### **The structure of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of 60 questions, concerning both organisational, group- and individual factors. Most questions had fixed answers to choose between, but we also included open questions, to capture the informants' own words in different areas.

### **Results**

We received 61 answers – i.e. 74 %, divided as follows:

|                   |             |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Blind             | : 34 % (21) |
| Partially sighted | : 66 % (40) |
| Boys              | : 48 % (29) |
| Girls             | : 52 % (32) |

13 of the students were reported to have light additional handicaps.

The material is quite representative for the population of Braille reading students in Sweden.

### ***Falling off***

The 21 questionnaires that were not returned to us represent a spreading between boys, girls, blind and partially sighted and in different school years.

The results are not yet completely treated, but we would like to emphasize some findings from the questionnaire so far.

### ***Personnel organization***

Classes in mainstream schools in Sweden often consist of 20 – 25 students, sometimes more. Almost all of the informants reported that they have a support teacher in the classroom. They also stated that additional personnel resources are an absolute condition for making inclusion possible for the visually impaired student. But the support can be shaped in different ways depending on the pedagogical situation, the group as a whole and the visually impaired student's needs. When not inside the classroom, the support teacher can use the time for adapting material and by this give the student the opportunity to work independently.

### ***External support***

How well does the support system for the mainstream schools work, according to these teachers? 72% of the informants reported that they are satisfied with the external support. But many teachers in the study also stated that it's often hard to know what kind

of support one should ask for, and said that it's easy to feel alone with the task of creating good opportunities for the visually impaired student.

### ***Organizing the teaching***

We asked the informants to rank the visually impaired student's activity and participation in different teaching situations, i.e. whole class, small groups and pairs.

Overall, the majority stated that the students were most active when they worked individually or in pairs. Regarding the students' participating, i.e. their interaction with other students while working with the task, the majority of the teachers ranked them as most participating when cooperating in pairs.

Perhaps the visually impaired student's opportunity to be active diminishes in a group of 3 – 4 children, because the sighted children tend to take over the assignment, maybe because they consider the visually impaired student as being too slow? In a pair it might be easier to assert one self, because there is no other partner to choose from.

### ***Individual teaching***

A great majority (89%) of the informants stated that their visually impaired student to some extent needs individual teaching, often conducted in a separate room next to the classroom. What can be the reasons for this? Do some subjects seem to be especially difficult?

The aspect of time is again a factor that was emphasized by many informants, one of the teachers' states:

*“Even though material is adapted the school work generally takes more time for the visually impaired student.”*

Peace and quiet while working is important and sometimes hard to achieve in the classroom, one teacher says:

*“When he gets tired and can't take the bustle in the classroom, he chooses to sit in the separate room.”*

Subjects and situations where students often need individual teaching are Braille reading and writing, because the student often has to practice this in a slower pace; math, because the subject often requires dialogue, and tests, the visually impaired student needs more time, peace and quiet and sometimes needs questions read out aloud by a teacher.

### ***Reading and writing skills***

In the material 34 students were reported to be only Braille readers, while 19 use a combination of Braille and ink print. 8 students *have been* combination readers, but are

now only ink print readers for various reasons. Of these 8 students some have had a recent improvement of vision and some simply refuse to use Braille, even though they might need it.

More than 50% of the total group was ranked as quite poor readers and writers, compared with the average sighted peers, regardless of if they use only Braille or Braille in combination with ink print. Almost all of the informants also stated that they think that the student's reading and writing skills is closely linked to their grade of inclusion in the classroom.

But what is the reason for poor reading skills? Of course this is not a question to which there is a simple answer. Some of the students might be overall poor achieving in school. We also know that blind children have less access to written text than sighted children have, when growing up. There is also the time factor – Braille is a “slow” media compared to ink print. The combination readers have to struggle with two medias, which may have as a result that they don't fully master any of them. Another factor is that many of the teachers feel they lack knowledge in how to fully support their Braille-reading student in reading and writing.

### ***Technical support – use of computers***

The computer is regarded as an important and helpful tool for students with visual impairment. 87% (53) of the students were reported to have a personal adapted computer. Almost all of them were stated to have good or relatively good computer skills, and more than 80% use the computer every day. But – when asked about how often the visually impaired student worked together with a sighted classmate on the computer, as many as 45% stated that this happened seldom, or never!

Those who stated that the student often use the computer to co-operate with sighted peers, described the computer in very positive terms, one teacher says:

*“The computer is a great possibility for the student to work on equal terms.”*

### ***Difficult subjects***

We were also interested in identifying specific school subjects that were described to be especially difficult, when it comes to making the visually impaired student included in the teaching situation. Three areas stand out in the material as being especially difficult: physical education, art and math/science. Several informants state that one problem sometimes is that the student really wants to do the same assignment as the classmates, but it is difficult to adapt material that is mainly built on pictures or other visual input.

### **The social situation and the child's individual traits**

A pattern in the material is that there is, not surprisingly, a connection between the

visually impaired student's social skills and the amount of successful interaction with sighted peers in the classroom. The more the visually impaired student himself is active and initiates contact, the more often he is chosen by other students to work with, and the more included he is ranked to be in the classroom setting.

But – as many as 60% of the informants stated that the social situation in the classroom is not optimal, in the sense that their visually impaired student is mainly oriented towards grown ups, and seldom initiates contact with the classmates in the classroom. This seems to go both ways - the classmates are as disinclined to make contact with the visually impaired student. There seems to be no difference between blind and partially sighted students.

Almost 70% stated that the visually impaired student's status in the group is generally quite low, and they are seldom chosen when, for example, the children are to form groups.

But still, about 60% stated that the visually impaired student's social skills are just as good as the average sighted child, so poor social skills can not be the sole explanation to this, even though it sometimes might be a part of the explanation.

The student's need for support from grown ups and perhaps the grown ups' tendency to be too close to the student contributes to making interaction with peers difficult, one teacher says:

*"He becomes alone with his assistant."*

And perhaps another part of the explanation is that the visually impaired student has to concentrate so much harder to keep up with the other children in the schoolwork, that there is no time to focus on interaction, another teacher:

*"He focuses only on the assignment."*

Among the visually impaired students that are ranked quite high-achieving in school, the teachers' opinion of their status was a little different, a teacher says:

*"When it comes to knowledge and abilities, his status is actually quite high. But socially, he has no status at all."*

In these cases some of the teachers also tend to try and use the student's skills to impress the other children, and thereby improve his status. This might be for a good cause, but of course it also puts a huge pressure on the visually impaired student to work even harder.

The problems with interaction seem to increase in the higher grades, when the sighted peers' tolerance for the visually impaired student's slowness, need for support and the fact that there is always a grown up around, decreases.

## **Conclusion**

We would like to emphasize that the material has not yet been completely treated, and the more we look into it, the more thoughts and questions rise.

It is of course no surprise to find that, according to the informants in this study, various factors influence the possibility to become fully included for the student with visual impairment. The personnel organisation around the student, the teaching methods and the teacher's competence is of course important. But the child's individual traits and the specific difficulties that come with the handicap is equally important, more than 80% of the informants stated that the student's lack of vision in itself, limits his possibilities to be fully included. It is therefore important to study the work towards successful inclusion from different perspectives and on different levels.

We should also ask ourselves: What do we really mean by the concept of inclusion? What is "fully" included" and is "full inclusion" possible? Every child needs to be treated according to his or her unique qualities, so they can be, and feel, an equal part of the context in which they are placed.

But equal mustn't mean alike in the sense that you must become like everybody else to fit in. It's rather about getting equal opportunities to develop your potential, regardless of your handicap, but not by erasing your handicap. You can never pretend that the handicap doesn't exist, the difficulties that the handicap brings must be recognized, in order to minimize the negative effects of it.

We would like to finish by sharing the thoughts from one of the teachers, concerning the struggle for successful inclusion:

*To really understand how to succeed with inclusion, of course, education is required. But teachers, headmasters and other personnel must also be aware of the complexity of social interplay."*