

Identifying favourable factors for inclusion of Braille reading students in mainstream settings – a long term case study

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Introducing the project

During a period of three years, an interdisciplinary research project is carried out at Swedish Institute for Special Needs Education, Resource Centre Vision in Stockholm (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 student with severe visual impairment can be as included as possible in the teaching situation and in the social life in 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 ongoing long term case study

Background

Of approximately 3000 children with visual impairment in Sweden about ten to fifteen Braille reading students begin the first grade in their local school every year. The children are then seven years of age. For some of the students Braille will be the main reading and writing medium and for some of them it will be a complement to ink print.

In a class that includes a Braille reader, it is common to have an extra teacher, known as a support teacher - in addition to the classroom teacher. The support teacher is usually not a trained vision teacher. Therefore, most of the teachers, even the classroom teacher, attend the further education courses that are arranged at the

Resource Centre Vision. They also receive support from local advisors for visually impaired students.

Purpose

The aim of part study two, the case study, is to get a better understanding of how teachers, students and parents experience the school situation and the child's possibilities to be included in the teaching environment. The following questions are addressed:

What is *teachers'* and *parents'* understanding of how the child's possibilities of being active and participating are influenced by

- the structure of the learning environment and the choice of working methods?
- the physical environment and the use of technical aids such as the computer?
- group factors?
- the child's individual prerequisites?

How does *the child himself* experience his situation and his own possibilities of being active and participating in the teaching situation?

The study group

All seven Braille readers who started first grade in a mainstream school a certain year, as well as their parents and teachers, were asked to participate in the study. Everyone accepted, hence the study is a complete investigation. Four of the children are blind and three are partially sighted. Four are girls and three are boys.

Structure

The group is studied for three years, from first to third grade. Twice a year the children are video-taped in the class room, and interviews are conducted with the child, the classroom teacher and the support teacher, the third year we will also interview the parents of the children in the study. We are now in the second year of the process.

Results

We will present two cases that we think have evolved to become good examples of settings for creating successful inclusion – even though the two children and the overall conditions are quite different. We will give you a brief view of our observations during the first two years in school for these children..

Adam

First let us introduce Adam, who has some residual vision and is a full time Braille reader. He attends a class of 25 students. During his first school year Adam has a classroom teacher and a full time support teacher. Besides his Perkins braille Adam has a computer with a refreshable Braille display, but the computer is seldom used during the first year.

Adam is described as being intellectually on the same level as the average classmate. He has a strong resistance towards reading and writing. **(Film)** Most of the time Adam works with his support teacher by his side in these exercises, inside the classroom, here is a video clip from the first year.

Adam has a hard time accepting his visual impairment, and he expresses sadness and worry in many different ways. He strives to be like everybody else and sometimes he deludes the other children that he can see more than he actually does. He is reacting strongly when he is supposed to do exercises outside the class room.

When it comes to social skills Adam is described as slightly immature, but he is interested in interaction with the other children. He initiates more contact with them inside the classroom than outside.

Adam's status is described to be quite high. According to the teachers the main reason for this is because he has an extra teacher and "cool" equipment, which attracts the other children.

He has one really close friend among the boys, and he is very oriented towards him. Therefore the teachers work a lot with trying to help Adam to open up more to the larger group, by for example offering structured play activities that might tempt him to join.

The teachers tries to remind the children that Adam manages well if they just think about certain things when they play with him... that they have to tell him what's going on, where they're going and so on. *"...and they realize this and remember for a while, but then they forget."*

It seems important to Adam to feel that he is doing the same things as the other children. The teachers think that most of the time they succeed in adapting exercises and material in a satisfying way. Adam often expresses that he thinks that he is the only one doing a certain task, so it's important to always explain to him what everybody is doing.

The second year:

In the beginning of second grade the support teacher quits her job and the classroom teacher is working alone for a couple of months. This is hard for everyone, it is impossible for the teacher to meet everyone's needs. Adam is worried and screams for attention, and sometimes he refuses to go to school. After some time, to everyone's relief, the new support teacher arrives, and things rather quickly go back to normal again.

Adam is described as more mature and more independent. The classroom teacher finds the whole situation more satisfying when it comes to Adams participation and inclusion. **(Film)** He takes more part in group- and pair exercises, and in this video clip you can see him in cooperation with a sighted peer. Most subjects now work

quite well and it's easier to communicate with Adam about his need for support in certain areas. Adam himself states the following:

"Sometimes I have to do things a bit differently, because I have a visual impairment. That means that I'm sometimes slower than the others."

Adam has opened up much more and engages a lot more in interaction with a larger group of children. The other children also initiate more contact with him on equal terms. The teachers think this has to do with various factors, and the most important probably is their efforts to work with the social environment.

Veronica

Let us now introduce Veronica, who is blind, and attends a class with 20 students. Veronica is a skilled Braille reader, she learned to read before school start.

During Veronicas first year in school the classroom teacher works closely together with a full time support teacher. The teachers conduct a very flexible teaching method. Every child has an individual working schedule which makes it possible to work on different levels. The teachers put a lot of effort in working with the social environment, and often let the children work in small groups or pairs to facilitate interaction in the classroom. Veronica never has individual teaching outside the class room, she takes part in all classroom activities. **(Film)** We are now going to see a video clip of Veronica working with a classmate. They are reading a recipe for making cookies. Then they are writing a summery of what they have been doing.

Veronica uses a manual Braille writer and computer in school work. During our first visit the computer is being used quite frequently by Veronica but the teachers find it hard to come up with ideas on how she can co-operate with a classmate in computer work.

Veronica is described by her teachers to be high achieving in school and is intellectually on a higher level than most of her classmates. Her motivation for reading is high. Veronica is also described to have good social skills, but in the classroom she is very task-oriented and initiates little contact with her classmates, even though they sit close together. According to the teachers Veronica never expresses any thoughts or concerns about her visual impairment.

Veronica herself says that she enjoys school, actually more than having spare time. She likes to have things to do all the time.

"I don't like spare time. I want someone to tell me what to do. I have a hard time coming up with ideas by myself."

The teachers describe Veronica as being "just another child in the group", they even sometimes seem to forget that she is blind, because she manages so well. The fact that she is so high achieving of course makes it easier. Most subjects are quite easy to teach, thanks to the flexible teaching methods.

The second year:

The second school year Veronica has a new classroom teacher. She is carrying out a more structured teaching style than the former teacher. This seems to suit Veronica well. There is still a lot of flexibility in choices of material and such, and the class still works a lot in small groups and pairs, but the schedule and the activities are more fixed. Veronica has more control over what's going to happen during the week.

This year the computer is more frequently used to co-operate with classmates. This has actually led to more contact between Veronica and her classmates in the classroom. She is, on the initiative from the teacher, teaching her peers the keyboard-training program. **(Film)** In this video clip you can see Veronica introducing her keyboard to a classmate. Veronica herself says that she thinks it is great that her peers are interested in her equipment, and that they now can write stories together. Veronica says:

"I like the computer - it's easier to work with my friends"

The support teacher describes Veronica as even more independent this year. She manages most tasks by herself, and the support teacher tries to stay in the background as much as possible. The support teacher says:

"She needs me less – I hope that she will continue to need me a little though, otherwise I will soon be out of work!"

Veronica is considered very participatory and active by both her teachers. Her status in the class is high and her relations to other children describes as more equal than last year. The new teacher is pleasantly surprised of how well things have worked out. Veronica herself expresses that she feels like one in the group and she thinks all subjects are easy to follow. She says: *"Nothing is difficult, most things work out fine."*

Conclusion

Following these seven Braille readers in the study we have once again become aware of the complexity of this field. As we all know the group is heterogeneous and the children have various needs. Because of this, it is hard to give any clear guidelines of what successful inclusion is. We have now met Adam and Veronica, and what can we learn from them? The two children and the overall settings are quite different. Veronica is from the beginning high achieving and well functioning, and the teachers seem quite confident from the beginning. Adam on the other hand, has a tough first year due to his low self esteem and problems with accepting his visual impairment and the teachers need to adopt different methods to help him overcome this.

If we compare these two children with the other children in our study, a pattern seems to emerge. The children with residual vision seem to compare themselves to a much higher extent with their sighted peers during their first year in school, than the blind children. They also express stronger feelings about their visual impairment and their shortcomings earlier than the blind children.

The visual handicap in itself seems to bring limitations for the child in social interaction.

The visually impaired children in the study tend to initiate contact to a much lesser extent with their peers in the classroom than the sighted children do. This may lead to a pattern where the sighted children don't initiate contact either, hence a negative spiral emerges. Teachers need to create a climate which facilitates communication for *all* children. This can be arranged by letting the children work in small groups in the classroom. Cooperation in pairs seems to give young visually impaired students the optimal condition for participation and activity. With the right exercise the computer can be an important tool for cooperation. Teachers need to find ways to make Braille and other special tools, as the computer and the CCTV, exciting even to the other children. Sometimes the visually impaired child can be the teacher, you remember Veronica.

In our study we have learned that it is important to be two full time teachers in the classroom to make the social and pedagogical climate optimal for inclusion for the visually impaired child in the class. But even if the social situation seems to be quite satisfying on the surface, it's important for the teachers to be observant and support the children in their relations otherwise it might lead to a backlash later on.

In conclusion, in order to reach a satisfying school situation for these children you have to focus equally on the pedagogical and the social environment and make them form a whole. To quote Adam's teacher:

"When the social situation is satisfying, the schoolwork and everything else is easier."