

## **A school for all. The new role of a resource centre when all visually impaired pupils in the country (Norway) are in local inclusive schools**

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Reorganisation of special education with the aim of inclusive education and a school for all has been a process over many years in Norway. The two schools for visually impaired are today changed into resource centres and organised in a national support system.

This article is focusing on the change in educational policy in Norway and the new role of resource centres as a consequence of the change

Today we have no boarding school or special school for pupils with blindness or low vision in Norway. All visually impaired children, even the totally blind and most of the pupils with developmental impairments in addition to the visual, are living at home, they attend their local school and a majority of them go to ordinary classes.

### **Change in educational policy.**

In 1969 a new Education Act was passed in Norway dealing primarily with primary and lower secondary education giving all children the same statutory right to nine years of schooling. (From 1997 the compulsory schooling was expanded to ten years from the age of 6).

In connection with the new act a parliamentary committee concluded with three main principles:

- \*As many as possible of the pupils in elementary school should live at home
- \*Special education should in most cases be given in ordinary schools
- \*The legislation for special school should be integrated in the elementary school law.

They suggested a reform with an overall aim summarised in the words equality, normalisation and integration.

The committee discussed the concept integration and defined it as follows:

- belonging to a social community
- sharing the benefits of the community
- joint responsibility for tasks and obligations in the community

In 1975 we had a law-revision with integration of the law for special education in the ordinary law and it was stated that handicapped children as far as possible should be integrated into the regular schools. The act secured all children the right to receive free and appropriate education in their local public schools, and the responsibility for all compulsory education was placed with the municipality.

In 1997 all previous provisions and acts for education in Norway were integrated in one law, and the curriculum for all education was revised. For deaf pupils special curricula were set up for sign language and special syllabuses in some subjects. Deaf children was the only group supposed to go to special schools.

In 2000 the Education Act was amended, so that pupils who are blind or have profound visual impairment were given the right by law to obtain education in Braille, Technical Aids, and Orientation and Mobility. This is considered an integral part of ordinary education for these pupils in primary and secondary schools. The children are given an additional number of lessons, up to 2033 extra lessons over 10 years.

Today a school for all is the basic precept of Norwegian educational policy. Wherever they live in the country, all girls and boys have an equal right to education in their local school, regardless of social and cultural background and possible special needs.

With the aim of equality there even have been suggestions that children with special educational needs should loose their right to special education and substitute it with the obligation school authorities have to give individualised education to all children.

## **II. Reorganisation of special education**

As a consequence of the change in policy, the Norwegian Parliament adopted reorganisation of special education in 1991. Some of the state owned special schools were shut down or transferred to the municipalities or counties. The two schools for visually impaired in Norway together with the special schools for hearing impaired, language disorders, behavioural disorders, and learning disabilities became resource centres for special education, and *The Norwegian support system for Special Needs Education* was established.

The overall aim of the system is to:

- give guidance and support to the local educational authorities in providing educational facilities for children, young people and adults with special educational needs

The four goals are:

1. provide a high level of professional special educational support in a flexible contractual collaboration with local authorities.
2. acquire, systematize and further develop competence in special needs education through targeted experimental, research and development work organized in co-operation with universities, university colleges and other associates.
3. provide expertise in special education for the benefit of users with severe, and special and complex needs and their families, for teachers and other professionals in the local community and educational system and for associates.
4. secure the education of students with hearing impairment

The rest of this article will focus on services from Tambartun Resource Centre, and the new role of the centre.

### **III. Activities at and services by a resource centre.**

The activities at Tambartun resource centre are quite different from what I can remember from the old school for the blind some years ago. All support from the resource centre is given on demand from local schools and is based on a written agreement with the school authorities in the municipality. The municipality is responsible for all compulsory education.

Any assistance from our centre is entirely based on collaboration with parents, local school authorities and professionals, and of course the teachers and administration of the school. In order to secure the quality of the guidance from our centre, one of the best-qualified professionals is given the responsibility for all services to each pupil.

### **IV. Individual assessment**

#### **Assessment of vision**

Any individual curriculum and adaptation of the pedagogical situation to the needs of individual pupils should be based on individual assessments, and most of all it is important to make an assessment of the children with regard to their vision.

According to **WHO the impairment definitions of low vision** are categorized in five groups depending on visual acuity and visual field. In addition to acuity or in stead it's quite common to measure contrast sensitivity (a scattered optometric chart, not a chart based on optotype)

Children in category 1 and 2 might use ordinary print with the aid of different optical or electron-optical equipment. Most of the border liners in category 3 are dependent on Braille, but diagnosis and prognosis are taken in consideration. Children with vision in category 4 and 5 will normally use Braille in reading and writing.

Assessment of vision in children is done to find how residual vision might be used in an educational setting and under which conditions some of these children need to be treated as pupils who are blind. It is a crucial decision, a decision of vital importance for the pupil if he/she is going to use vision or touch as the main modality (Braille or ordinary print) in reading and writing.

### **Developmental screening and assessment.**

To what extent it is important to make developmental assessment like IQ-tests by psychologist or motor tests by physiotherapist is a matter of different opinions. At Tambartun we have established a team responsible for the decision about what kind of assessments that are necessary for our counselling and guidance. Knowledge of the mental resources of the child gives important information for the planning of individual curricula. For any teacher it is a challenge to set appropriate expectations for a pupil.

### **Educational assessment**

In educational planning for a pupil with visual impairment it is necessary or at least preferable to know as much as possible about the pedagogical situation today, the pupils level of ability in different school-subjects, what he so far has accomplished. In addition it is desirable to map the pupils' needs when the educationalist shall give some advice concerning the individual curriculum, what should be learned and how.

During courses for blind pupils at Tambartun we are especially aware of assessment in Braille reading and writing and we try to ascertain any special problems in subjects like mathematics and geography.

## **V. Local consulting and tutoring**

### **A. Family focused early intervention, pre-school advisory services**

A basic principle of our work is that any visual impairment should be identified as early as possible, and assessment of vision may be the most important one.

Early intervention should secure adequate stimulation of the child to prevent passivity and/or distorted development. Through home-based early intervention pre-school teachers help parents to understand the importance of interaction and communication with their child and to prevent lack of stimulation in critical periods for the child. That's why our preschool teachers try to visit the parents frequently.

## **B. Client-oriented multi-disciplinary counseling and guidance in local communities**

When writing an **agreement** with the municipality on services for pupils using Braille, we commit ourselves to visit the local school two to six times a year to provide support to the regular classroom teachers and to the parents, guidance with the administration of the school and assessment, observation and instruction of the pupil

The pupils with visual impairment, the local school staff and the parents place a huge variety of **demands on the itinerant teacher**. He/she should possess knowledge and skills to give support in all school-subjects, give methodical guidance to the teacher when teaching the pupils to read and to solve mathematical problems, assist the classroom teacher in organizing the class, give instruction in use of technical equipment and assist the teacher in choosing appropriate teaching strategies.

In services from the centre the itinerant teacher tries to have a **holistic perspective**, a holistic approach concerning the pupil, the pupil at school, at home and through all the day. The counselling should also have **both a short and long term perspective** in the planning of objectives. That means to set goals both for a short period of time and for the future.

During the visits to the local school the itinerant teacher/counsellor is providing **assessment**, observation and instruction of the pupil, **support** to the regular classroom teacher and gives **guidance** to the administration of the school.

In addition - the itinerant teacher often visits the home to observe the pupils homework and offer guidance to the parents.

## **C. Giving expert advice in individual curriculum development**

In Norway an important part of the counselling is to help the school to develop an individual curriculum for the pupil (IOP). The curricula should in addition to the other pupil's syllabus include the training in special techniques, mobility, activities of daily living and the use of special equipment. For pupils dependent on Braille a huge challenge in this planning is the methodology of teaching Braille reading and writing. For purpose of inclusion, as much as possible of the educational program should be placed within the frame of the classroom.

## **D. Individual plan**

In addition to the IOP all children in Norway in need of different services have the right to an Individual Plan to organize and coordinate all services and for short and long term planning.

## **VI. Pedagogical training courses (for teachers, classroom assistants, advisory teachers, other staff members from local schools, and for parents)**

### **A. Training courses for people working with visually impaired in kindergarten and in comprehensive schools**

The content of the course needed for the local staff will mainly depend on the age of the pupil, the degree of visual loss, and if there is any developmental impairment or special diagnosis like NCL (Spielmeyer Vogt) or RP (Retinitis pigmentosa).

For children using, or are going to use Braille, the regular teacher has to learn to read and write Braille. For younger pupils he/she has to learn pre-braille activities and the methodology of teaching elementary reading and writing etc.

He/she might also have to learn the different techniques and skills in special subjects like mobility and ADL. The classroom teacher should also learn to know what activities that should be introduced in the class in subjects like art and crafts and physical education to support inclusion

Teachers with pupils who are able to use their vision in their education, have to learn how their pupils can function optimally with some adjustment of the teaching and by use of special materials or optical equipment. Some of these children need training of their vision, but the teacher's capability to do this training is dependent on their understanding of low vision. Also in teaching students with low vision the classroom teachers have to be prepared for the different challenges they meet in subjects like mathematics, science and arts and crafts.

### **B. Using Information and Communications Technology to give professionals flexible and user-friendly opportunities to take part in teacher training programs.**

In Norway we have, in cooperation with the University of Trondheim, started the implementation of IT (information technology) in teacher training courses. The last three years about hundred teachers/students have followed these courses at Tambartun giving them credits to an academic degree. These courses are branched, the students start with a basic course, and then they can choose courses related to their own work or interest like mobility courses, courses in teaching pupils with blindness or pupils with low vision.

## **VII. Special education needs courses for visually impaired pupils**

### **A. Courses for pre-school children**

Courses for pre-school children are combined with courses for parents. It is also natural to combine individual assessments of pre-school children with courses for children and parents.

Planning school-start is a comprehensive challenge for the child, the parents, the school and the itinerant teacher. During these courses we prepare the pupil's curriculum, our counselling and we sketch a plan for the agreement for cooperation between the local school and the Centre.

### **B. Courses for school children**

When we in Norway removed the possibility for pupils with visual impairment to go to a special school, we immediately saw the necessity of establishing special education needs courses at the centre. The pupils need for courses are both from academic and social reasons. At least once a year we are offering pupils at the same grade level, using Braille, from all over Norway, a one or two weeks training course or a special needs programme. During these courses it is convenient to teach the use of special aids, and teaching the pupils to utilize practical skills in mobility and activities of daily living (ADL). Maybe the most important part of these courses is the training of rational techniques in reading and writing. In Norway the need to try out different computer technologies and to train the use of these specialized electronic devices for blind and partially sighted pupils, is an essential part of many courses at the centre.

We have also found it especially important for the social development of children with severe visual impairment or blindness to get the offer to meet other visually impaired children at their own age level once a year. The reason for the importance is their need for an identity group. It isn't easy for a blind pupil to have a full satisfactory social adjustment in a group of only seeing children.

## **VIII. Production and distribution of learning materials, publishing of specialized literature**

### **Design and production of educational aids**

Educational aids for pupils with visual impairment includes adapted Braille books, usually with a teachers guide, adapted talking books (DAISY), often in combination with tactile illustrations, pedagogical/educational stimulating materials and learning materials like tactile maps, models for sciences, equipment for geometry and for calculation (abacus).

In Norway we have very limited production of books in large print (ink). The pupils in need of large print are advised to use optics or other equipment to manage ordinary types.

### **Adaptations and production of textbooks in Braille**

Development and adaptation of textbooks is an important part of the pedagogical developmental work at our centre. At Tambartun the same teachers or educationalists are both developing and adapting textbooks and are giving itinerant counselling/guidance to pupils and teachers using the Braille textbooks in inclusive education. At the centre the educationalist works in close cooperation with an illustrator and a text operator when working with adaptation and development of textbooks.

bbAdaptation and production of new textbooks is a process that demands a lot of work. Often it is necessary to do a rather comprehensive pedagogical adaptation of the material in order to make use of the textbook. Completely different means of expression is often necessary, and adaptation is like developing a new parallel textbook. Often the new textbook becomes a part of the teaching methods for the pupil.

### **Pedagogical/educational stimulating material**

Tambartun has an innovative, creative unit for development and production of tactual aids for children who are blind or partially sighted. For younger children a variety of textures, shapes and colours are important aid in tactile and visual pedagogical stimulation.

### **Publishing of specialized literature**

To provide our expertise in special needs education to parents, teachers or other professionals in the local community we have found it necessary to motivate the staff to write textbooks in our field, papers and posters for courses and conferences, and produce articles to periodicals.

## **IX. Develop competence by research and development work in special needs education**

### **Project-organized work**

In my opinion competence forms the fundament of a resource centre. To acquire, systematize and develop competence is an important part of all activities at the centre. We call it *to have a competence-building work profile*.

A rational way to develop knowledge is through project-organized work. In Norway we often use the term that each user/ each pupil is her/his own project.

### **Projects in cooperation with universities**

The resource centres in Norway have affiliations with universities or other institutions with competence in research. Our experience in Norway is that collaboration with universities is of mutual interest. The Centre is dependent on the theoretical and scientific contribution from the research institution, and the university is very interested to approach our field of practice, our contact with the schools. The university and the Centre meet on the border between theory and practice.

### **Arranging and participating in national and international conferences**

It is important to be in touch with the national and international development of competence both in our narrow field and in the more general pedagogical field. Our line is dependent on other areas, and we also have to be prepared to work interdisciplinary. In this connection participation in different courses, seminars, symposiums, workshops and conferences are important for upgrading the professionals/the staff of the Centre. Participation in and arranging of conferences is also a suitable mean to get the professionals to make a systematic documentation of their knowledge in specific subjects.

### **X. Public information**

The old tradition of special schools has been one of isolated schools with little or no contact with other people even in the close neighbourhood. To develop services and provide the support persons with impairments, the parents, the teachers and the school-authorities are in need of, the centre has to ensure a close contact with life outside the centre. By different strategies the centre can enhance the **public awareness** on visual impairment and on the education for the visually impaired.

An argument for public information is to influence **the attitude** in society toward blindness and persons with severe visual impairment.

### **XI. Special school classes for visually impaired children**

After we had started the transformation of Tambartun from a special school to a resource centre, we still had special school classes for almost 20 years. During these years I noticed several **benefits** for the centre by having these classes, and benefits for our support to local schools.

First of all, when children from inclusive school settings came to our centre for observation or courses, we could put the children in the classes for a period. In the class setting we could do valuable assessment, **observations** and we could give the pupil education in topics and subjects in question.

The classes were also used in connection **with pedagogical training courses** for teachers from local schools. They could follow the teaching of the school children in different subjects and in the training of techniques, the course-participants could both observe our instructors at work and try to perform the teaching under supervision of the professionals at the centre.

Another benefit from that period was that we could use those classes in **our internal teacher-training program**. The whole staff of the centre has a personal developmental program, and we needed an arena to test techniques and educational methods.

## **XII. Final remarks**

When we initiated the integration process for pupils with blindness many years ago, we were conscious of our demands to the local school and how we from the special school could support the pupil, the school and the parents. To describe the demands and support in an agreement with the municipality was a necessary assumption to start the integration process. With the change in educational policy in Norway to inclusion and a school for all, no one questions the benefit of the training offered to students with visual impairment today.

The new role of a resource centre like Tambartun in a more comprehensive educational support system related to children with special needs is very extensive compared to special schools. My experience is also that the work at a resource centre is a lot more varied for the staff and that they appreciate to have a more challenging work.

Finally I will assert that mainstreaming or not after my opinion is not a pedagogical problem but a sociological question and an issue concerning resources. The most valuable result of this mainstreaming is that all people in Norway from the pre-school child to the adult, are used to meeting and associating with the impaired, and the attitude to the blind has changed positively. Our worry today is the visually impaired pupils' social development, how to fulfil their social needs and contribute to a healthy social adjustment and inclusion in the community.