

Does inclusion of visually impaired students work?

What are the pitfalls of inclusion?

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, many European countries have made a tremendous shift in their educational approach with regard to visually impaired students. In this process, the focus has moved from special schools towards inclusive education in mainstream schools.

Denmark has a reputation of being a country where inclusion is successful, but over the past ten years, I have often been asked whether this is really the case. Is inclusion a good approach for visually impaired students?

Several parameters can be used to investigate or evaluate the outcome for visually impaired students in mainstream education. But one essential question beyond the educational outcomes per se is the subsequent position of the visually impaired person in the labour market.

The important evaluation question therefore, is, what is the percentage of visually impaired students...

- who get similar grades to fully sighted peers?
- who receive a full graduation diploma at the end of 9 or 10 years of schooling?
- who complete a higher (tertiary) education programme?
- who complete a qualifying or vocational education programme?
- who find gainful employment that lets them support themselves?

A recent research project¹ studied the outcomes of the educational and rehabilitation efforts in Denmark over the last 40 years. The outcome, briefly put, is very disappointing. It would be easy to say that this is due to inclusive education, since that has been the general educational approach during the period in the study, but there is no indication that the visually impaired students would have been better off in special schools.

The research project simply found that the services available to visually impaired people have failed in the above-mentioned aspects, and that the present trend is continuing in the wrong direction. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the Danish authorities have never spent as much money on services for people with a visual impairment. Thus, the poor outcome has nothing to do with cuts. The only explanation I can come up with is that we are not managing the inclusive and rehabilitation services in the right way.

¹ SFI – The Danish National Centre for Social Research 2010. Based on responses from 1,364 members of the Danish Association of the Blind. Compiled and coupled with information from the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Employment.

What, then, is the right way? I will conclude this paper with a general European overview of essential themes to specify how these services should be managed to achieve better results than we have been achieving in Denmark over the last 40 years.

The structure of this paper

Part one offers a summary of the research project on educational outcomes for visually impaired students and the position of visually impaired persons in the Danish labour market.

Part two part will address the situation of visually impaired adolescents in inclusive settings with an emphasis on psycho-social factors. To me, this is the key factor in understanding subsequent difficulties.

In part three, I will discuss the impact of psycho-social conditions later in life by referring to a job rehabilitation project for visually impaired people who are unemployed.

In part four, I will outline how inclusive education and rehabilitation services should be structured and organised, and what content is essential to achieve a successful result. I will do that by referring to experiences in a number of European countries.

Hopefully, this will offer the reader insights into the conditions and parameters of inclusive processes.

Part 1

Barriers to inclusion

It may come as a surprise to many that in many ways, the situation for visually impaired people in Danish society is moving in the wrong direction. As a group, visually impaired people encounter many barriers and difficulties in society. A visual impairment may isolate the person, make it difficult to get a degree and can lead to unemployment. Research shows that it is not the visual impairment in itself that causes the problem; rather, it is the lack of education and issues with low self-esteem that make it difficult for people with a visual impairment to find employment. In the 1990s and 2000s, many legislative initiatives and projects aimed at offering special-needs support were launched, but with little effect.

It is difficult to offer one single explanation for this deplorable situation. One important issue is pervasive changes in society and in demands on workers, which have occurred very quickly, but on the other hand, it is apparent that our services have failed to adjust to match these transformations.

In age, the visually impaired respondents in the research project span from 70 to 30 years². Inclusion – or integration, as it was known then – was officially introduced in 1980. Thus, the generation of people born in the 1960s was the first to encounter inclusive education. The research project does not state any direct link between inclusion and the deplorable Danish outcome; it simply shows that the negative development that began for the generation born in the 1950s, now between 50 and 59 years old, has continued and even gained strength, and it is now impacting the generation born in the 1970s, who are currently aged 30-39.

What are the figures?

Table 1: the percentage of visually impaired people who complete a vocational education programme.

68-82%	64-78%	58-72%	48-68%
Born in the 1940s	Born in the 1950s	Born in the 1960s	Born in the 1970s

The reason for the big differences between the generations stems from differences in development for people who are partially sighted and those who are blind. There are also differences between men and women. Interestingly, for the generation born in the 1940s, more blind men than fully sighted women completed a vocational education programme. The group with the biggest drop in percentage is partially sighted men.

Table 2: the percentage of visually impaired people who complete a qualifying education programme³.

56-69%	52-61%	42-48%	27-29%
Born in the 1940s	Born in the 1950s	Born in the 1960s	Born in the 1970s

Table 3: the percentage of visually impaired people who complete a tertiary programme.

42-68%	42-64%	39-55%	26-30%
Born in the 1940s	Born in the 1950s	Born in the 1960s	Born in the 1970s

In this regard, blind women do better than blind men. For people born in the 1940s, 68% of the women got a further education, compared with only 42% of the men. The biggest drop is for partially sighted men: from 62% to 26%.

The overall analysis shows that the oldest generation of visually impaired people have almost the same education rates as fully sighted people. The picture has since changed dramatically, so that the share of visually impaired persons in the youngest generation included in the research project who complete an education programme has dropped to one third of share for fully sighted people. This is a big setback for blind and partially sighted

² The generations who were born in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s, respectively. The generation who was born in the 1980s was included because they are expected to have completed their education.

³ This covers a broad spectrum of education, including specific programmes such as massage therapists, piano tuners and telemarketing workers.

people situation in the field of education. This change has occurred in the matter of just a few decades, and there is no indication of change in that trend in Denmark. On the contrary. A structural change in the organisation of services from 2007 has put even greater pressure on visually impaired people.

The situation in the labour market

Most visually impaired adults rely on a pension or welfare benefits. This despite the fact that many of them would be quite able to work. Whether they *feel* that they are able to work is a question that I shall return to. The 20% who say that they would like to work are especially those who have previous work experiences, and those who have a tertiary degree. Being in a relationship also increases the likelihood of wanting a job. Thus, a person who has no education and no previous work experience and who lives alone is less likely to pursue a job.

The research project found that 37% or less of the visually impaired are employed. But this number depends on the definition of employment. This number includes people in supported workplaces and similar projects. Using the definition of being fully self-supporting, the actual percentage is 15%.

That leaves Denmark with the highest unemployment rate for people with visually impaired in Europe, 85%.

There are of course several reasons for this. Resistance and ignorance among employers is one possible explanation, but often workplaces are in fact very positive once they learn about the possibilities for support and assistive solutions. A major obstacle is so-called mental barriers. These will be addressed when I discuss the situation in the inclusive education system (part 2) and when I refer to the rehabilitation project from Aarhus (part 3).

Part 2

Visually impaired children – inclusion or isolation?

This part of the research project is based on interviews with 13 blind children between the ages of 10 to 15 years. Their parents were also interviewed.

The report paints a very worrying picture of visually impaired teenagers. Today, all visually impaired students without additional disabilities are included in mainstream education. This gives them the ambition of living on par with their fully sighted peers, but it does not afford them the conditions they need to live a fully integrated life. If they were to enter society for real, they would have to learn about social interactions and gain insight into themselves and their visual impairment. Even if this process of realisation may sometimes be hard and painful. The adults⁴ fail in this respect. They are more concerned about the child's well-being here and now. They want to provide a good childhood and protect the children and adolescents from painful experiences. The adults are successful in the here-and-now; but

⁴ This includes parents, teachers and other professionals.

for the child, the cost is an inadequate development of the human resources that are so important later in life. Especially in the labour market.

Modern childhood sociology underlines relationships with peers as the most important factor in the child’s identity development. But the research report shows that the gap between the visually impaired child and the peer group expands as the child becomes a teenager.

The visually impaired children in the research project state that they are doing well in school, but they have a feeling that they are not met with the same demands or challenges as their peers. One of the general statements from parents is that they have an “extremely close” relationship with their child. In this regard they differ from parents of fully sighted children who typically state that their relationship is “close”.

Some numbers about the children’s and teens’ social life.

	Visually impaired	Fully sighted
Receive visits from a friend:		
5 times a week	0	9
2-4 times a week	8	49
1 time a week	15	22
A few times a month	23	14
More rarely or never	54	7
Visit a friend:		
5 times a week	0	7
2-4 times a week	8	55
1 time a week	8	12
A few times a month	23	12
More rarely or never	62	5

About the academic level at school.

Research has shown the mainstream schools have difficulties in providing academic skills that equals the level of fully seeing students. Many of the visually impaired students don’t have satisfying academic competences when they leave school. Their grades are lower and many of the visually impaired students leave the ground school after 9 or 10 years without a complete certificate of graduation. In this way half of the group of visually impaired students is excluded from entering gymnasium or vocational school.

The impact on a personal level

Generally, the visually impaired students are satisfied with their school. Some factors are outlined as difficult. Many of the respondents feel that they are regarded as weak or “special”, and that this stigma prevents them from interacting fully with their peer group. The students state that they are often placed in atypical educational and social situations because of their visual impairment. In this sense, paradoxically, the child appears to view the

support system⁵ as stigmatising and as an obstacle to social interaction rather than an aid to development.

Part 3

How the psycho-social implications hinder access to the labour market

As mentioned earlier, the unemployment rate of visually impaired people is extremely high in Denmark. This has of course led to several government-funded projects to ease this group's access to the labour market.

One of these projects, "A foothold in the labour market", submitted its final report in May 2011. The project was carried out in a collaboration that involved the Danish Association of the Blind, the Ministry of Employment and Marselisborg Research Centre in Aarhus.

In 2008, the Danish Association of the Blind conducted an employment study where the members were asked if they wanted to participate in this project, which might help them find a job. 360 visually impaired persons responded: They would like participate; they wanted a job. After two information meetings in Aarhus and Copenhagen, 99 visually impaired persons signed up. 56 persons completed the whole course, while 45 participants left during the project period.

Of the 56 persons who went all the way, 37 had found a job or embarked on an education programme by the end of the project. The report does not specify how many were in each of these groups.

To me, it is interesting to understand why less than 10% of those who stated that they wanted a job actually managed to find one. Why did more than 90% quit during the time from their first response to the end of the project? Many of those who chose not to sign up or who dropped out along the way were asked this question. The typical reply was that they had "changed their minds".

The project managers conclude that visually impaired people "turned out to be a difficult group to help."

Most of the explanations that were offered by the group of "drop-outs" had to do with anxiety and worrying. They had very low self-esteem and were insecure with regard to their own abilities. They foresaw all sorts of difficulties, but most of all, it was difficult for them to maintain their motivation.

Motivation is a psychological theme that is closely related to identity and self-image – precisely the mental competencies that we discussed as lacking in part 2 of this paper. When the relationships or interactions with the peer group are weak we often find a specific identity constellation, which is characterised by an inadequate understanding of one's own

⁵ The support person, visiting consultant/teacher and technical aids.

competencies, limited social skills and social understanding and difficulties in articulating realistic goals that reflect one's needs and wishes.

This renders the visually impaired person uncertain and fearful, and understandably, the professional finds it difficult to help the person.

From this point of view, it is obvious why inclusion does not work in Denmark. Inclusion in Denmark is not a failure; it simply fails to produce the desired outcome: full participation in society. We are not doing it the right way.

Part 4

What is the right way?

In my work on the board of ICEVI-Europe⁶, we have often talked about inclusive education. We have looked into the different situations in different countries, including unemployment rates.

We have identified three key areas, which of course overlap.

1. The qualifications of the involved professionals

This includes frontline classroom teachers, consultants, rehabilitation workers and social workers.

Specifically, these professionals need knowledge in the following areas:

- Compensatory methods or educational approaches that work for visually impaired people.
- Competence in managing inclusive methods.
- Competence in working with relationships; for instance the families' behaviour, the support teacher's role in the classroom, the attitude of the parents of the other children in the class, and the general public's interaction with the visually impaired person.

These qualifications should be mandatory. In some countries⁷ the law specifies mandatory teacher qualifications and a specific curriculum.

In Denmark we have absolutely no national requirements or regulations in these areas.

2. The organisation of services

⁶ International Council for Education and Re/habilitation of People with Visual Impairment.

<http://www.icevi-europe.org>

⁷ The UK and Norway.

This concerns the issue about the number of support organisations or institutions; the way their responsibilities are outlined or how their tasks are described, and the way they cooperate. These matters are essential to the outcome of the services.

These services include early intervention, teachers of the visually impaired, special schools or centres, production of educational materials, national or local support centres, vocational schools and universities, jobcentres, in-house training, rehabilitation agencies, technical compensation in the workplace, and associations of the visually impaired. These services may be labelled and organised differently in different countries.

But it has become clear to us that if there are too many independent organisations that do not cooperate closely, the outcome for the visually impaired recipients of these services is poor. On the other hand, a unified system⁸ with clear responsibilities produces much better results⁹.

The Danish system consists of several services on a national, regional and municipal level. There is no formal cooperation or governmental regulation; instead there is a competitive culture where everybody is struggling to get “customers” to level the budget.

3. The funding of services

The central question is, “Who foots the bill?” Of course, all expenses are somehow covered by public funds in Denmark; no visually impaired student has to pay extra because of their impairment. In Denmark, we often say, for example, that technical aids are free of cost for the user. That is true, but there may be a cost in terms of inclusion.

I remember visiting a school where a blind boy in the 7th grade needed a new computer for use in the classroom. Due to a political budgeting decision, all the educational resources in that specific municipality were transferred to the local schools according to the number of students at the school. In the school that I visited, no additional resources were allocated for this visually impaired boy, so the cost for the new computer had to be taken out of the ordinary budget. The only place where the headmaster could find this rather large amount of money was in the budget for extra-curricular activities. The annual field trip for the class was cancelled, and the boy had his computer. But he was not very popular afterwards.

This story illustrates that if a school, a vocational training centre or a university has to cover extra costs out of the ordinary budget to provide special services such as technical aids, special teacher training or special lighting in the classroom, the consequences for inclusion are disastrous.

⁸ Like ONCE in Spain where the unemployment rate of the visually impaired is 20%. This is close to rest of Spain.

⁹ In The Netherlands they have just merged several organisations into one, “VISIO”.

As I said earlier: Everything is paid for with public funds. But if a teacher or a parent feels that the other students or the school is losing money due to the inclusion of a student with an impairment, or if the blind student's literacy teacher needs a braille course but has to compete with the math teachers who have their own legitimate training needs, then things are bound to go wrong.

It is important that a country has centralised resources that are earmarked for visually impaired students. This includes resources for assistive aids, for staff and teacher training, for professional support and for education materials. If we want to offer inclusive education it is essential, that the visually impaired student is never seen as an additional financial burden.

In Denmark, there is a strong political tendency to minimise or reduce national or regional resources. The mantra is that "decisions are best taken at the local level", meaning that the headmaster is in the best position to decide whether the roof needs repair or the teachers need additional training. That may be true, but it is not helping the inclusion of visually impaired students.

Summary

From my point of view, we are practically taking all the wrong turns in the way we manage inclusive education in Denmark. It does not make sense to say that inclusive education is wrong or ineffective in itself. Inclusive education *is* the right way to educate visually impaired students. But we have to do it the right way and not look at it as a way to save money. In many cases, creating truly inclusive education is more expensive than setting up special schools.

When I look at European countries I see a direct relationship between how a country manages the three organisational issues and the unemployment rate of visually impaired people in that country.

The important issue is to choose the right model of inclusion.

Peter Rodney, MA (Applied Psychology)

- Research and development officer at the Danish Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted.
- Lecturer of Psychology at the Danish University of Education, Dept. of Special Education.
- Vice chair of ICEVI-Europe.
- Mail: pr@ibos.dk