Brief Note

Reformation of Education for the Blind in 1960s England in Relation to Widening Opportunities for Open Employment

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In this study, the reforms that took place among schools for the blind in 1960s England and the reasons thereof as well as the extended opportunities for open employment are clarified. Barriers such as lack of basic knowledge of machine operation and the sighted community dissuaded blind school graduates from entering open employment. These barriers were associated with two complications. The first was related to the school curriculum and the second to segregation from the community because all the schools for the blind were residential. The first further education college for blind people was established to bridge this gap. Furthermore, the schools for the blind introduced alterations such as expansion of extra-curricular activities and curriculum revisions with a stronger focus on the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE).

Key Words: visual impairment, education, employment, sheltered workshops, England

Introduction

When the first school for the blind was built in Liverpool in 1791, employment in sheltered workshops that were designated for blind people were the predominant career option for blind people in England. In these workshops, handicrafts such as making baskets, boots, and mattresses were learned. Furthermore, it was the norm for visually impaired students that finished their schooling at the age of 16 to enter the schools’ local centers or training departments. Employment in these sheltered workshops remained the dominant outlet for the graduates of schools for the blind even after the Second World War. However, the financial deficit experienced by the sheltered workshops in the mid-1950s forced this situation to change.

In this study, how education was delivered at schools for the blind in relation to occupation is examined. Furthermore, the educational reforms that took place for the visually impaired in relation to changes in the job market are clarified. The reasons behind the reform and its educational significance are also discussed.

Studies conducted by French (2006), Pritchard (1963), and Rose (1970) focused on England’s education for visually impaired people in the post-war era. However, none of these studies examined education from the perspective of employment.

The author believes that this study provides an insight into the current education system for the blind and those with disabilities in a number of ways. First, the issue of employment of people with disabilities has led to constant discussions on how and where their education should be conducted. For example, in the early 1970s in England, organizations of blind people such as the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students (ABAPSTAS) criticized segregated education and ignited a discussion on integrated education. Their demand to close all special schools and implement full integration was strongly related to the issue of the under-employment and misemployment of blind people (Jamieson, Parlett, & Pocklington, 1977, p. 54; NFB & ABAPSTAS, 1973, p. 9, pp. 12–13). On the contrary, recently in Japan, despite the shift toward
inclusive education, there has been a slight increase in the number of special schools and in particular, schools for students with intellectual disabilities as a result of strong demands from parents and disabled students that have stemmed from their aspirations to acquire necessary skills and guidance in order to secure successful employment (National Institute of Special Education, 2010). Therefore, to understand education for students with disabilities and promote the global agenda of inclusive education, it is essential to consider employment. Second, inclusive education, which is now the global standard, has been known to reflect the social and cultural backgrounds of Western countries that have led the inclusive education movement (Oka, 2010, pp. 516–517). An examination of education for the blind in England reveals that traditional handicrafts were the most popular occupations among blind people. This is very different from Japan where oriental medicine such as acupuncture and moxibustion were widespread. Oriental medicine remains the major occupation supporting economic independence in Japan1). In order to implement genuine inclusive education in Japan, it is imperative to understand the country’s educational challenges in its own context. An examination of England’s situation provides a cross-cultural perspective that further helps one to explore and interpret the cultural and historical significance of the Japanese approach.

This study involved documentary analysis of primary sources. To examine education for the blind, annual and inspection reports of Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, and the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind of a particular period were utilized. Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind was established in 1837 in the north-east of Manchester. It was established as an elementary school under the Education Act 1921 for children between the ages of five and 16. After the introduction of the Education Act 1944, it became a modern secondary school. The Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, which was established as an elementary school in 1852, continued to function as an all-age school under the Education Act 1944. These two schools were chosen because they were typical; they were built in the early to mid-19th century with traditional handicraft-training departments within their premises. Two primary official papers, the Report of the working party on the employment of blind persons published in 1951 and the Report of the working party on workshops for the blind published in 1962 were examined in order to come to an understanding of the conditions and problems that characterized spheres of employment. Furthermore the journal, Teachers of the Blind (from 1930 to the 1960s), which is a national journal for teachers and professionals in the field of education, was also used as a resource.

Increasing Opportunities for Open Employment and Its Impact on Graduates of Schools for the Blind

Workshops for the Blind as a Safety Net

Like Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind and the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, most large residential schools, which were built in the 19th century, had workshops attached to their premises (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, p. 257). It was the norm for students to enter the local centers or training departments within the schools to learn the manual skills needed in sheltered workshops after graduating at the age of 16. In these training premises, they were instructed in traditional blind trades that included making baskets, boots, mattresses, and brushes. By 1936, 1,413 graduates from the schools for the blind had been trained in these traditional trades (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, pp. 258–261).

Workshop employment had both advantages and disadvantages for blind students. Wilson (1944) noted that most of these trades had been brought to England from France during the late 1890s, but they were already outdated in relation to the rapidly changing economy that resulted from the industrial revolution (Wilson, 1944, p. 143). Consequently, the earnings they obtained from the traditional trades were low and their wages were supplemented with augmentation, which is an amount from the government to compensate for visual impairment. Thus, in this context, work did not provide true economic independence for the blind graduates (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, p. 216). Yet, workshop employment was undoubtedly a privilege compared to the sighted young individuals who had to seek jobs at the age of 14 and often ended up with temporary employment (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute
for the Blind, 1936, p. 159). Moreover, the harsh reality was that there was a limited number of jobs available for blind students. Howard, a trainer and supervisor of one of the training departments for the blind, noted that it was especially hard for ordinary clever blind people to find jobs. While there were opportunities in office work or shop counter jobs for ordinary clever sighted students, blind students were not afforded these opportunities (Howard, 1935, pp. 84–85). Workshop employment acted as a safety net for blind students because it provided a stable, tolerable amount of income after full-time education from the age of 16.

Because there were limited jobs available and sheltered employment promised a decent future, teachers tended to consider workshop employment to be an inevitable channel of employment, which often discouraged students who hoped for different prospects (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, pp. 215–216).

Widening Opportunities in Open Employment and the Unchanging Outlets for Blind School Graduates

During the First World War, charitable organizations such as the National Institute for the Blind and St. Dunstan’s established Placement Offices to help blind people in sheltered employment move to open employment. Substantial progress was made because of these efforts together with the outbreak of the Second World War, which created many factories, including munitions factories that were in desperate need of workers (Ministry of Labour & National Service, 1951, p. 12). In 1942, in eastern England alone, at least 60 blind people were reported to be in open employment (Edkins, 1942, pp. 149–150). Even after the war had ended, with the implementation of the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act in 1944, which imposed a 3% quota system to encourage employers to provide employment to the disabled, this number continued to increase.

Yet although the number of blind people in open employment increased, career options for them remained limited until the late 1950s (Ministry of Education, 1951a, p. 18; Ministry of Education, 1951b, p. 12). In Table 1, the career paths for graduates from two schools for the blind in 1951 are presented; it reveals that few students entered open employment and that traditional handicraft training remained the path for the majority (70%).

The reality was that although the number of blind people in open employment increased, their career options remained limited (Ministry of Education, 1951a, p. 18; Ministry of Education, 1951b, p. 12). The work offered in open employment included mainly semi-skilled and unskilled industrial occupations, which comprised repetitive tasks that required no visual discrimination. Therefore, the majority of those who entered open employment included those who had recently lost their vision and had no training and/or blind people who were once deemed unsuitable for handicrafts after years of training (Ministry of Labour, 1962, p. 5).

Financial Crisis in the Workshops for the Blind

In the 1950s, workshop employment became one of the chief concerns among teachers and specialists in education for blind students (Getlaff, 1954; Howard, 1945; Jarvis, 1951; Ministry of Labour & National Service, 1951; Myers, 1955). The dire financial deficit of the workshops for the blind underlay these concerns. Until 1948, these workshops along with other open industries, benefited from a huge post-war demand for goods. As shown in Table 2, profit was calculated at 26 pounds per worker. With the augmentation payment of 130 pounds per head,

| Table 1 Graduate Career Paths from the Two Schools for the Blind |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind | Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind |
| Going onto higher education | 5 (12%) | 8 (16%) |
| In training for sheltered employment | 27 (66%) | 35 (70%) |
| Employed (open industry) | 8 (20%) | 6 (12%) |
| Other | 1 (2%) | 1 (2%) |
| Total | 41 (100%) | 50 (100%) |

(Ministry of Education, 1951a, p. 18; 1951b, p. 12)
each worker received an average of 86 pounds. However, by the year 1955, with the rise in labor costs, the augmentation payment had almost doubled to 255 pounds, and the loss was calculated at 99 pounds per head, without taking augmentation into account. Ironically, as noted by the Ministry of Labour (1962) in its report on the working party on workshops for the blind, “it should have saved money to close down all the workshops while continuing to pay the blind person the same wage and augmentation as before” (Ministry of Labour, 1962, p. 17).

As Myers (1955), a teacher at a school for the blind states, the objective of education for the blind—to cultivate “normal citizens playing a normal part in society” with economic independence—was far beyond what was achievable (Myers, 1955, p. 251). The financial crisis of the workshops was jeopardizing the very goal of education and feasibility of schools for the blind.

**Barriers to Open Employment and Related Complications**

Although the need for blind school graduates to enter open employment was clear, several complications had to be addressed.

According to the literature published during this time, it was a popular opinion that it was impossible for young blind school graduates to enter open employment directly because they lacked two important skills (Ministry of Labour & National Service, 1951, p. 21; Myers, 1955, p. 252). The first was the basic knowledge and skills needed for machine operation. Open employment involved machine operation as well as shorthand typists, piano tuners, and physiotherapists, the proportion of which gradually increased. However, in the early 1950s, machine operation was the most popular, available job, next to unskilled or semi-skilled employment. The second skill they lacked was awareness of the sighted community; it was often said that blind school graduates tended to be less socially mature than their sighted counterparts.

However, these barriers could not be easily addressed. Blind schools had to face two complications related to these barriers in order to widen career paths for their graduates.

The first was linked to the curriculum of schools for the blind. In most schools, classes started at 9:00 a.m. and usually ended at 4:30 p.m. Braille as well as subjects such as science, history, English, geography, physical education, and music were taught (Board of Education, 1937, pp. 6–7). However, few vocational training activities such as handwork were conducted until students reached the age of 16.

This was quite different from the United States’ education for blind people. In the journal, *Teacher of the Blind*, DeMez, a teacher from the Michigan State School for the Blind who was visiting schools for the blind in England, commented with surprise on how American education included vocational training alongside basic education at the early age of 12 (DeMez, 1939, p. 254). Payne (2002) revealed that there was a strong belief that education should stand alone and not be seen as a preparatory period for a vocation (Payne, 2002, pp. 353–354). It was believed that non-vocational education widened “mental horizons” and helped young blind students mature mentally and build their character (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, p. 161). Teachers’ aspirations for non-vocational education can also be noted in the following extract of a report written by the Teachers of the Schools for the Blind in 1936:

> Even if a blind person was to become a professional musician, the person must have a good command of

### Table 2 Costs of the Workshops (1947–1958)

| Financial Year | Average earnings of blind workers per head, £ (2) | Average augmentation payment per head, £ (3) | Profit (+) or loss (−) per blind worker*, £ (4) | Net costs of employment per blind worker, £ (3)+(4) |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1947–1948      | 86                                            | 130                                        | +26                                           | 104                                           |
| 1950–1951      | 97                                            | 149                                        | −37                                           | 186                                           |
| 1954–1955      | not available                                 | 255                                        | −99                                           | 324                                           |
| 1957–1958      | 134                                           | 282                                        | −135                                          | 417                                           |

*Not taking augmentation into account.
(Ministry of Labour, 1962, p. 16)
English, should have a knowledge of English literature and be acquainted to some extent with a foreign language (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, p. 142).

Even in the late 1950s, there was strong resistance against conjoining basic education with job training. The Royal National Institute for the Blind’s Industrial Investigations Officer, Ellis Turner, who was invited to give a lecture in a meeting of teachers from the schools for the blind in London, strongly urged the schools to introduce simple, repetitive tasks using simple machines in their curricula or extra-curricular activities. He explained that as students had little or no experience in handling machines and learning basic techniques while attending school, they never attained mastery of more complex techniques that would lead to higher paying jobs. However, Turner’s claim was not well received by the teachers (Studdert, 1960, pp. 158–159). The conflicting reactions rested on the firm belief that the function of a school was and should be to provide general education; a belief that had prevailed since the pre-war period. To them, Turner’s idea sounded like a utopian solution.

The second complication faced by the schools for the blind was related to the segregation of schools from the community. There were debates on the advantages and disadvantages of segregated schools: it was widely recognized that institutional life did not cultivate social relations and was inadequate to deal with unfamiliar situations (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind, 1936, pp. 218–219). However, it was normal for blind children to leave their families and communities at the age of five to enter residential schools for the blind. Some blind children were even sent away at the early age of two to enter the Sunshine Home for blind babies, a nursery home run by the Royal National Institute for the Blind. In the 1930s, the number of blind students was about one among every 5,000 sighted students, which dropped to about one among every 3,500 by the 1950s, thus ensuring that residential school settings remained an inevitable phenomenon (Ministry of Labour & National Service, 1951, p. 21).

Solving the Complications

The Launch of Further Education Colleges

Two significant working parties were set up to tackle these complications and bridge the gap between the school and workforce. In the early 1950s, a working party was set up with W. Tayler, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Labour and National Services, as chair. The Working Party for the Workshop for the Blind was also set up in the late 1950s (it published its report in 1960), with J. G. Stewart from the Ministry of Labour serving as chair. The report overseen by W. Tayler (known as the Tayler Report) confirmed that 3,000 employable blind people between the ages of 16 and 65 remained unemployed and further recommended that pioneering diverse occupation options besides handicrafts be offered to expand the scope of open employment. Furthermore, as blindness made it difficult for blind school graduates to enter open employment directly, the report suggested a further education college be established to serve as a vocational assessment center. This recommendation led to the establishment of Hethersett College in 1956, the first pilot further education college for the blind.

Hethersett College was expected to solve the complication by accepting students at the age of 16, right after they had graduated from schools for the blind.

| Table 3 Graduate Career Paths from the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Going on to higher education    | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 | 1967 | 1968 | 1970 | Total |
| Chorleywood College             | 0   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 2   |       |
| Worcester College               | 0   | 0   | 3   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 0   | 41    |
| Royal Normal College            | 1   | 4   | 0   | 8   | 3   | 2   | 4   |       |
| Hethersett College/Queen Alexandra College | 1   | 4   | 11  | 17  | 7   | 7   | 10  | 57    |
| Employed                        |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |       |
| Open employment                 | 0   | 1   | 2   | 5   | 0   | 0   | 8   | 16    |
| Workshop for the blind          | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   |       |

(Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1970)
The college focused on vocational guidance and social skills, which were essential for open employment work, but in the curricula of the schools for the blind (Royal National Institute for the Blind People, 1961). Within five years of the college’s opening, 17% of the graduates from the schools for the blind were enrolled at Hethersett (Ministry of Education, 1961, p. 32). The college’s positive impact was evident: of the 181 graduates that finished Hethersett from 1956 to 1963, 133 entered open employment. Owing to the increasing demand for further education colleges, Queen Alexandra College, which was similar to Hethersett, opened in Birmingham the following year. The different career paths associated with the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind graduates are presented in Table 3. It was evident that by the mid-1960s, the students enrolled in further education exceeded those in sheltered workshop training (Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1970).

Expansion of Extra-Curricular Activities and Alterations to the Curriculum

With the establishment of further education colleges, changes to the school curriculum were also made in an effort to resolve the complications that had arisen.

First, efforts were made to expand extra-curricular activities. For example, different extra-curricular activities, amounting to only a few in the late 1940s, more than tripled in the 1960s with music, debate, and weightlifting clubs being established (Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, 1960, pp. 15–16; Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, 1962, p. 15; Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, 1964, p. 16). All students were encouraged to join these activities to cultivate social skills. In addition, the gatherings included the parents and residents of the community who became more engaged than previously. The school conducted parents’ nights, and field trips with the Manchester Taxi Drivers Association became an annual event enjoyed by many students. These activities were included to teach students the skills, knowledge, and manners needed to live in the sighted community (Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, 1967, p. 5). These changes were not only implemented because of the changes in the workforce, but because of other related factors such as the impact of progressive education principles and John Bowlby’s insight into the effect young students’ separation from their mothers had on them. Bowlby’s research was published several times in the national journal, Teacher of the Blind, thus, revealing high interest (Toomer, 1967, p.11). Parents’ nights and other community-related activities were highly encouraged to alleviate the negative effects of separation from parents.

Second, along with the emphasis on extra-curricular activities, the educational content was also revised. At Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, education was increasingly emphasized by refining the curriculum to focus more strongly on the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). The CSE was introduced in mainstream schools in 1962 and especially in secondary modern schools. Furthermore, the CSE became a popular qualification for entering open employment because it was utilized as an indicator by employers to select qualified personnel from a large youth population who were searching for jobs, underlain by the post-war baby boom and by the active participation of women in the labor market (Halsey, Floud, & Anderson, 1961; Ministry of Education, 1959, pp. 47–49). The Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind bought their first Thermoform during this time because they realized the importance of teaching students figures and graphs, which were necessary to pass the CSE (Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, 1969, p. 5).

Because more than 40% of mainstream students were enrolled for the CSE, the students in schools for the blind were also advised to enroll for the course in order to be able to compete in the same labor market. The first applicants from the schools for the blind enrolled for the CSE in the late 1960s. At Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, five students took and passed the CSE English exam for the first time in 1967; this number had increased to 10 by 1969 (Henshaw’s Institution for the Blind, 1969, p. 5). At the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, 10 students took and passed the exam in 1970 (Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, 1970, pp. 3–4). However, these reforms alone were not enough to change the situation as the unemployment rate nationwide crept inexorably upwards in the 1970s.
Conclusion

Although there was an obvious need for blind students to aim for open employment, barriers such as lack of basic knowledge of machine operation and sighted community awareness dissuaded them from pursuing their goals. However, teachers of blind students believed strongly in the importance of basic education. The subsequent reform, which was introduced, was twofold. First, further education colleges that accepted students after the age of 16 were established. Second, schools for the blind revised their curriculum and focused more strongly on the CSE. Educationally, this reform was significant because extending the length of education up to the age of 18 or 21 years for some afforded blind students the opportunity to continue with their the basic education and obtain other skills. Although the students who enrolled in further education had exceeded those in sheltered workshop training by the mid-1960s, the complex problem was not completely resolved: unemployment of the disabled and non-disabled youth remained a nationwide challenge. Ironically, segregated education, which was extended because of the establishment of further education colleges became a target of criticism and was viewed as a factor in the unemployment and misemployment of young visually impaired individuals by the NFB and ABAPSTAS in the early 1970s.

Education for the visually impaired has changed dramatically in England in the past 50 years. Currently, approximately 70% of primary and 60% of secondary school students with visual impairment are educated in mainstream schools (Morris & Smith, 2007).

However, there remains the problem of employment among blind people (Giesen & Cavenaugh, 2012; McDonnal, 2005; Pavey, Douglad, & Corocoran, 2008). Therefore, research is still being conducted on the factors that impede blind people from finding employment (Giesen & Cavenaugh, 2012; McDonnal, 2011; McDonnal & Crudden, 2009; Pavey, Douglass, & Corocoran, 2008; Zhou, Smith, Parker, & Griffin-Shirley, 2013). It is of interest that the factors involved in successful employment that have been revealed in current studies such as mobility skills, social skills, computer competence, and academic competence were also emphasized in the post-war era, with the exception of computer competence.

This phenomenon may imply that although there are universal factors that are paramount to employment, certain skills such as computer competence together with variables such as social attitudes toward people with disabilities evolve over time. Therefore, the gap between education and the workforce is based on complex factors, and those factors evolve with time, creating a perpetual gap.

Last, this study leads to the following question. It investigated education for blind people, which in many cases included partially sighted individuals, as many people could not be identified precisely. However, as Pavey, Douglas, and Corocoran (2008) found, blind and partially sighted people face different challenges when entering open employment. Therefore, further research might examine how these changes in educational provision affected each group.

Endnote

1) As of 2006, about 24,000 visually impaired are engaged, which is 30% of the total number of working visually impaired people.

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