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## Blind teen-age students' expectations

Focus: school-age

Topic: What are the changing demands for the person with visual impairment?

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Various reports (Lewi-Dumont, 2005) stressed that the topic of inclusion at the secondary level should be one of the main concern in several countries. In France, since the promulgation of a new law (2005) and a new organisation of mainstreaming disabled pupils, inclusion increased significantly, particularly in high schools. Blind learners, who used to be mainstreamed after mastering techniques, do so much earlier. However, one can assume the hypothesis that a successful inclusion depends on a lot of persons and facts. Being involved in a new OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) international research on factors determining the success and failure of high school and university handicapped students in a statistical and objective way, I shall focus on the conference topic and deal with visual impairment only, presenting the feelings and expectations of students about their experience in high schools. After presenting the backgrounds of the study, I will outline the major topics students introduced.

### 1. Backgrounds of the study

#### 1.1. The OECD research

OECD conducts a longitudinal research in 10 countries, including France, about handicapped students in general. It aims to assess the impact of material and human helps to high school and university students: the first part is to reach as many young people as possible who were, in 2007, in last year of high school and others who were in their third year of university so they fill out questionnaires. After analyse, the case studies, for which I volunteered for visually impaired, will be performed. For this lecture, I will present a few blind students' opinions, which will help building the items for the case studies.

#### 1.2. 12 interviews in 2009

I started a modest qualitative study. Through Internet, I reached and recorded blind or partially sighted students (age 13 to 24): since too few used print, considering needs of partially sighted learners are different from blind people's, I will use the interviews of 12 blind young people living in various regions of France who experienced different ways of schooling. Some are still in high school, others are in university or work. They were happy to be interviewed, were friendly, spontaneous and confident.

The differences in ages and experiences, although not chosen, will allow perceiving an evolution.

I chose to let them express themselves but asked some complementary questions. I transcribed the interviews and will lean on their own words to tackle the main points: although each person is different and has different needs, studying the way these students express their needs, the strengths and the lacks they felt in their curriculum seems to be rich for professionals and for teachers' trainers. I will concentrate here on secondary school, what they told about higher education will be used elsewhere.

### 1.3. Schooling in France

Although with the 2005 law, mainstreaming is the normal way of schooling handicapped children, 3 ways remain possible: individual mainstreaming in the reference school, mainstreaming in a school with a resource room or class<sup>1</sup>, and special school.

There are also 3 main steps in schooling: elementary (1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade), secondary: junior secondary ("collège" 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>) and high school ("lycée", 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>). The academic demands are more important at each level.

Each person told precisely what type of school she attended (see table below). Two excellent university students experienced only one way of schooling, Pamela and Jonas. The others experienced different ways of schooling. The youngest tend to have had more mainstreaming, except Max, who, coming from a foreign country, chose it.

### 2. General feelings and memories about high school time

All the young people appreciated, in special and resource schools, what they call "comfort" (Braille transcriptions) and the expertise of support services, particularly of special teachers. They also appreciated (with unpleasant exceptions) the commitment of teachers used to have visually impaired in their classes. However, feelings depend greatly upon their previous experiences: when used to be with sighted pairs, they generally have trouble to adapt to a more "closed" environment, in spite of "comfort". Jane and Patricia missed some freedom in their special school.

- "As far as I am concerned, special school has been more negative than positive" (Pat).

Simon was in a resource high school, his family moved, he arrived in another school:

- "I thought I would have more freedom, I would be less in a cocoon, and it was worse!"

Chris, who had to go in a resource school after being mainstreamed in her town, never got used to it and "did not find it easier":

Probably now, mainstreaming and special support would be better prepared and this "regression" would not happen.

Except for Patricia, junior secondary school in a resource school has not been appreciated for different reasons, essentially human<sup>2</sup>. The youngest seem to feel comfortable alone in their schools.

Some of the interviewed mentioned also the high school years as "tiring", when they got a lot of pedagogical and technical support and were far from home or just because studying is more demanding. It is also noticeable that most of them used the word "effort" needed to succeed, effort from themselves, effort from adults.

### 3. For a successful high school

Almost all the young people have dealt with four major points.

#### 3.1. Before high school: skills and transition.

The young, spontaneously, said that to succeed in high school, primary was essential, particularly for the specific skills they have to master, primarily Braille grades 1 and 2 and technology. Tim and others insisted on the importance on good Braille teachers, all insisted upon academic skills:

- "It is really important in primary school to be well trained (...) if you miss it, it's bust" (Ralph).

What seems important is a progressive way to be mainstreamed. Most of them insist on the role of special teachers, with tenderness in their voices, and on the importance of more "closed" displays for who needs it ("it is good to keep the possibility not to be

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<sup>1</sup> « Classe d'intégration scolaire » (Clis) in elementary, « Unité pédagogique d'intégration » (UPI) in high schools.

<sup>2</sup> UPI are generally considered as good half-way displays (cf. Lewi-Dumont, 2003, but for that article I interviewed adults and not the pupils themselves)

mainstreamed” Jane). In their opinion, all transitions must be well prepared, as well changing schools and professionals as changing materials (computers) or way of working. Pamela mentions:

- “Until 4<sup>th</sup> grade I had a great support teacher, but she did not follow pupils in high school, so, to facilitate the mainstreaming, so that changes would not happen altogether, she decided to pass me on to someone else (sad voice). Sure there have been strong links between us, but it has been a wise decision”.

She also mentions she « tamed » her new electronic display just before high school. Simon, mainstreamed in a progressive way (Lewi-Dumont, 2002), and Jonas (never mainstreamed) agree:

- “After second grade, they did not ask us, and that is great, because it seemed normal to us and we could not go back” (Simon)

Jonas says it is important to be mainstreamed “since early childhood”, otherwise “you get used to comfort and have to make too many efforts, and adolescence is an effort in itself!”

### 3.2. Material and support issues

Young people had support problems essentially when mainstreamed. They outline that in special schools, Braille books arrive on time, whereas it happens too frequently they don't get Braille documents in the same time as the others, although now they communicate more and more with their teachers through electronic devices. Lea says “teachers adapt themselves” when the transcriptions are not there. Tim considers it is the main condition for success.

They also mentioned that they wait sometimes for computers. Lea and Cynthia pointed out their frequent breakdowns.

In high school, special teachers are important, but act less directly with pupils at least in the classroom, but most of the pupils mention a positive play.

Teacher assistants, who are suspected to reduce autonomy of VI impaired pupils and are contested, were helpful according to Pam:

- “They dictated what the teacher wrote on the board (...) or if a Braille document did not arrive (...) teachers have other things to do than repeat for me (...) For me it has been essential, or at least very useful... “

Lea, now that she knows her school “by heart” and is autonomous with her computer, says she does not need hers anymore, Cynthia finds it more “relaxing” to have one and Simon “said it was out of question”.

Since school was the matter, the young spoke less about other specific helps, like orientation and mobility or daily living skills.

Finally, I would say they did not insist a lot upon material problems. Nevertheless, studying what happened after high school for most of them, there is still work to do to help preparing their future.

### 3.3. Communication

Communication is one of the most spoken about themes: the young with their schoolmates, the young with the adults and the adults between themselves. Pamela, who has always been successfully mainstreamed, repeats several times “I have been lucky”: with the special support teachers, with the different teachers' assistants, about the interactions between all the protagonists.

As mentioned, three interviewees (from different schools) expressed human difficulties in junior high resource schools: Ralph and Marion mentioned other pupils being jealous of the handicapped. Marion “was so fed up to be made fun of that (she) had to change”, preferring to go in a boarding special school far from home with a resource lycée. Chris missed too much her previous friends. On the contrary, Patricia keeps a great memory of the relations with her schoolmates:

- It is really the time I preferred, for example the sighted friends I have now, I all kept them from junior high.

Youngsters are mature enough to admit that some problems could be due to adolescence, theirs or their classmates'.

Lea, the youngest, is very happy "now":

- I have boyfriends and girlfriends, I spend time with them, here I am like the others

About communication with teachers, they never mentioned such terrible problems as reported in a previous article (1999). However, some had revolting anecdotes. For Patricia, it had consequences: she recalls with highly emotional voice her problem with a teacher, when individually mainstreamed in lycée with too little support. She had to quit and go to special school. Simon explains: " I have rather get along with teachers ".

Communication with specialised teams was generally good, but some pupils reproach them to categorize them and to think they know what is good for them better than themselves. Ralph and Marion asked to be in a more open environment, and had problems to get what they wanted:

Mar: roughly they said that to go back to mainstreaming you got to deserve it (...). So I said OK you want good marks, you will have them!

Pat and Jane suspect the special school not to have done their best to help mainstreaming.

Jane: Sincerely I think they put a brake for O & M and after they said I could not because I could not go to school alone!

Special systems change to adapt to the new legal texts, but, as soon as a structure exists, professionals assume all the concerned pupils are going to « fit » in it.

Some pupils suffered from a miscommunication between adults. Ralph remarks that teachers in his resource school had a tendency to lean on trained staff. When he changed school after a big struggle, he noticed teachers felt more responsible.

"Lucky Pamela" explains how her itinerant teacher shared knowledge with teachers:

- "Often, I had teachers who thought about directly with her on the possible adaptations (...) I had an extraordinary luck with teachers, from primary school to university!"

### 3.4 To succeed, everyone has his way

They all insist on academic and specific skills in high school. Most of them were surprised from the fall of the academic performances in special schools. For Pat, it has been demotivating:

- "Rhythm was cooler than before (...) so instead of working, I'd rather had fun".

However, Max and Jonas, who were not mainstreamed before university but are successful students, say:

Jo: the problem with mainstreaming is that you give your energy to adapt whereas you could put it in learning. That's why you must do it early!

Max: they always say the level is higher there, but if one wants to learn more, one manages (...), tries to improve, because one is not going to always stay here, one has to go beyond what one learns in classes..."

For all, mastering school standards is more important than other specific skills: they certainly would not think mobility as a prerequisite, but they insist on their importance for good relationship with friends and for independent life.

Jonas refused mainstreaming before university:

Jo: "I like my habits, I like my marks (...). Affectivity is important for me (...). They very much scared me: they told me "you'll never manage in university, you are not

autonomous!” but when I arrived in college I felt like a fish in water!”

Marion speaks for a “golden mean” where professionals are more “confident” to pupils: “they should ask their opinion”.

In conclusion, it is important to recall I presented only the subjectivity of the young people, but subjectivity and affectivity are strong motors for learning.

It seems there are improvements in the way teachers, generally, accept blind pupils in their classes. Of course, when comparing the oldest and the youngest, technology is of great help. However, reading and writing with computers is sometimes an excuse not to give documents in Braille, and it is often difficult for pupils. One must admit that in the country of Braille, Braille readers have still trouble to find what they need.

The frequent changes in the ways pupils were schooled are extremely interesting.

However, one gets the impression there is still a matter of chance in the way a blind pupil is schooled, unless his parents struggle. For others, a child happens to be mainstreamed or not depending on what exists in his region. And when only one display exists, it is supposed to be good for all blind pupils (“Naturally, we are all alike” Jane). “Schooling paths” (which means, following assessment of the child’s needs, he can change school) were present before 2005 law, but changes obviously are proposed in absence of adequate support. If there is lack of specialists, there is lack of choice for families, except when they know their rights... All the young people expressed strongly the fact they wanted to choose.

Many questions remain, I will mention three: partially sighted students did not answer, although more numerous; interviewed students were rather comfortable with school. All have been blind learners since childhood. The needs of pupils who have to learn new techniques, in the context of mainstreaming (Braille, O & M...) are worth a thorough study. I have hypothesis about those questions, and hopefully, the OECD research, which is supposed to reach all the disabled students of a given year, will help us to go further for a better support.

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**“Schooling paths” of the 12 young people**

	Lea (13)	Cynthia (14)	Tim (17)	Simon(17)	Max (19)	Marion (21)
Primary	Special boarding school 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> grades Special class in ordinary school	Mainstreamed (IT)	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> grades: special boarding school, then mainstreaming IT	Ordinary school with special teachers, including reverse mainstreaming	(out of France) Special school	Resource school. Mainstreamed after 1 <sup>st</sup> grade
Junior secondary high school (6 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup> )	Mainstreamed Itinerant teacher, Teacher assistant (IT &TA)	Mainstreamed IT & TA	Mainstreamed IT & TA	Resource HS. Moves: special class in a HS	Special school and mainstreaming	Resource HS
High school («lycée» 10 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> )			Mainstreamed in resource school from special boarding school	Mainstreamed IT	France: special school	Resource school : 10 <sup>th</sup> grade in a special class last two years: mainstreamed

	Chris (21)	Pam (21)	Jane (23)	Jonas (23)	Ralph (23)	Patricia (24)
Primary	Mainstreamed IT	mainstreamed IT & TA	Resource school. Mainstreamed after 1 <sup>st</sup> grade	Special school 1	Resource school. Mainstreamed after 1 <sup>st</sup> grade	Ordinary school with special teachers, including reverse mainstreaming
Junior secondary High school (6 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup> )	Resource HS	mainstreamed IT & TA	(moves): special school	Special school 1	Resource HS	Resource HS
High school («lycée» 10 to 12)	Mainstreamed	Mainstreamed IT & TA	Special school	Special school 2	Idem in 10 <sup>th</sup> individually mainstreamed the last two years	4 months mainstreamed, then special school