

The Rise and Fall of Life-Skills of Blind and Vision Impaired Persons

16 July 2020

Joseph Stephen BSc

BCA Tasmania

As I reflect on my life as a totally blind person, my abilities and educational achievements were made possible by a comprehensive educational system tailored for and provided by a school for blind students. This school provided far more than merely academic curricula. I outline the below to demonstrate the importance of such an educational foundation, and to demonstrate what is possible for a totally blind person given such a foundation.

- I lived independently with little assistance when I was about 20, was able to cook, clean, and maintain a home before I got married;
 - I was the first totally blind, Braille dependent student to complete a bachelor of science (majoring in computer science) at the Flinders University of South Australia, (and to my knowledge, still the only one to have done so), at a time when talking computers were only just invented;
 - I rode a tandem bicycle from Adelaide to Canberra to raise money for charity;
 - I have been married for 25 years, and raised a family of nine children;
 - I have been a software engineer for 26 years, first working in mainstream computing, and for the last 24 years developing the world's leading screen reading technology which enables blind people to access computers;
 - I have authored or co-authored six books;
 - I've performed in several bands as a drummer and singer;
 - I have presented sermons at numerous churches, camps, and conferences;
 - I have acquired an advanced amateur radio license (in radio electronics);
 - I have performed numerous carpentry, renovation and repair tasks both in the home and around the farm, from making intricate wooden toys to laying wooden floors, lining ceilings and repairing animal sheds, to fencing, irrigation, plumbing and electrical repairs etc.
 - I can also manage lighting and restocking a wood heater.
- I believe that I am not the only blind person of my era to have had such a good foundation for life-skills, but fear that subsequent generations of blind people have not been so fortunate. In fact, I have observed a rise in skill levels and expectations from prior generations, peaking in my generation as the "disability equality" movement gained momentum, then declining again. I believe the decentralization of blindness education from schools and blindness agencies, to early integration and now NDIA funded individual service provision has taken a serious toll.

When I went to school, integrating blind students into a sighted school was a new thing and only occurred in high-school or late primary school. The catch-phrase was "equality" which sounded good, but I believe went too far, resulting in a mindset that lead to integrating blind students into a sighted school right from the beginning of a child's education to their detriment.

Some of the anecdotal evidence that this is the case follows:

- I have heard from multiple independent sources of 13 year-old blind students who could not turn on the shower for themselves, let alone clean a bathroom.
- I have heard reports that blind students were not allowed to use scissors at school in case they cut themselves, let alone do woodwork.

- A blind person who once visited me for a meal had such atrocious social skills that after eating a pizza, they wiped their hands on the couch where they were sitting.
- Another blind person who once stayed at my home over-night could not make up their bed.
- Another one could not do dishes.
- Another could not prepare a simple salad let alone cook.
- Another burned out my electric frying pan, trying to cook.
- Other blind people who have visited me could barely get around their own house without assistance let alone move around my house or farm by themselves.
- A blind mother I met could not change her own baby's nappies and had to wait for her husband to do it.
- When I moved to Tasmania in 2018 and requested a Braille map of the state and area surrounding my location, I was informed that no-one had ever requested a Braille map of the state before. When I went to school, the orientation and mobility teacher would drop me off in a new location and expected me to find my way back to the school. He provided excellent Braille road maps and second to none training in communication and independence. Over the years I have noticed a steady decline in the quality of orientation and mobility trainers let alone find another trainer who is competent at making a decent Braille map.
- I have met blind people who can't cut up their own food let alone cook a meal.
- When I went to buy a talking volt meter, something commonly available 30 years ago, I was surprised to find how difficult it was to obtain one. Blind people aren't supposed to experiment with electricity. While amateur radio was a common hobby amongst blind people 30 years ago, very few are encouraged to tinker today.
- The reaction I got when purchasing a chainsaw one day reflected the same sentiment that blind people should not be capable of such activities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the move to integrate blind students into sighted schools too early may have been the cause for this decline in skills. I believe that integration is important, but that it should be attempted when the child has already gained sufficient life skills, perhaps in high-school or at least late primary school.

The primary advantages of a dedicated school for blind and vision impaired students include:

- While parents are often expected to teach their children basic skills such as manners, grooming, bathing, etc. they are often daunted as to how to teach a blind child anything, and the parent often ends up doing far more for the child than the child learns to do for themselves. Schools dedicated to teaching blind students used to fill in the gaps or assist parents with such basic training.
- When blind students learn together, not only can specialist education be given, but the very nature of learning in a group with other blind students provides a means of comparison and challenge. When a blind person is isolated in a sighted school, sighted children often treat the blind student as different and expect less of them. They also do not have the comparative learning environment in which they can gauge their behavior or skill level compared to other blind students.
- Many skills do require one-on-one training or training which is tailored for blindness. Skills such as tech-studies, home-economics, grooming, cleaning, etc. require adaptation and improvisation which teachers who constantly work with blind students are able to develop. When I was at school I learned wood-work, (including wood turning), leather work, pottery, worked with acrylic plastics, and just missed out on learning metal work as I was integrated into a sighted school that year. I learned to prepare and cook numerous kinds of foods. I also learned to play piano and drums.
- Teachers who work with many blind students are also able to better gauge reasonable expectations as to what a blind student should be able to accomplish. When students are isolated, their skill level, or often lack of it, becomes the standard of expectation.

- Teachers who constantly work with blind students also become better teachers of blind students, not only in how they teach but what they expect. This results in a higher standard of life-skills as well as teachers with greater expertise. As mentioned earlier, a decline in the quality of orientation and mobility trainers is a direct result of blind students being expected to do less at an early age, resulting in less ability when they are older, resulting in less skills being required of the trainers. I believe this accounts for the rise and then decline of skill-levels both of blind people and of trainers.
- While technology has drastically improved the accessibility to information and learning, it has overtaken the majority of other skills once taught to blind students as if it is a total substitute. Braille literacy has suffered immensely. It has been assumed that Braille is no longer important in an age of talking technology. Taking Braille away from a blind person is like taking a pen away from a sighted person. Blind schools taught Braille as part of their curriculum. Braille literacy included the ability to read tactile maps. I even know a blind teacher of yesteryear who could mark his sighted students written work using an optacon. Many blind people today can't even read Braille let alone read raised print.

In summary, a school dedicated to teaching blind students taught much more than reading, writing and arithmetic, it provided an environment in which blind students challenged each other, understood each other, competed with each other and grew up with a good support network. Teachers provided relevant and specific training, understood many of the issues specific to blindness and tailored their teaching methods appropriately, becoming better teachers of the blind. Blind students had a great opportunity to excel in numerous areas of development. Not all students excelled, but the opportunity was there, and many did.

I believe when we moved to a system of early integration, blind students began to be more isolated, and as a result, standards and expectations fell, and life-skills have declined to unacceptable levels.

Recommendations

- Blindness agencies need to implement outreach programs to blind students integrated into sighted schools, where blind students can be connected with blind mentors.
- Training centers need to be established perhaps attached to existing blindness agencies, where parents can gain help training their blind children in basic life skills such as bathing, eating, grooming, etiquette, etc.
- Skill-groups need to be established, beyond the social groups that often are associated with blindness agencies, where skilled blind individuals can encourage and pass on their skills to others.
- Parents of blind children need to be connected with other parents of blind children, and in particular, blind people who have succeeded in life, in order to encourage them to train their children, and to overcome the hurdle of managing a disabled child. When a child is diagnosed as being blind, if it is at birth, the parent is already overwhelmed with the new arrival, and information provided in hospital "parent-welcome-packs" will likely be forgotten. Service providers need to reach out to parents once the dust has settled, and provide information and the opportunity to network with other parents.
- Education needs to be seen as a holistic skill-set, not just be focused on the use of assistive technology to access information.
- Ultimately, schools for the blind need to be revived and students should only be integrated into sighted schools in their early teens. This of course requires skilled trainers, which only becomes possible as a long term goal as this recommendation is implemented.