Brief Note

Reorganization of Schools for the Blind: England in the Mid-1930s and 1940s

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The present study focuses on the reorganization of schools for the blind that took place in England in the mid-1930s and 1940s, in order to clarify the process of that reorganization and the reasons behind it. The review concludes that the reorganization plan was conceived in a 1936 survey of the education for the blind that was conducted by the College of Teachers of the Blind and the National Institute for the Blind. Behind that, there was a need to raise the educational efficiency of schools for the blind. The reorganization plan started being discussed in detail 2 years after the survey was published, by members at the National Institute for the Blind who realized that a reorganization would be important for the education of the blind, because creating schools that would fit all children meant preparing children to become democratic citizens just like children without disabilities. The reorganization was pushed forward on the National Institute for the Blind’s initiative, with Eagar and Purse taking the lead, and also by people who were blind in the general society, because they had high hopes for the expansion of job opportunities for the blind.

Key Words: blind, England, school reorganization

Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to clarify how schools for the blind in prewar England were changed into large residential schools that reflected pupils’ age, abilities, and aptitude, and to examine reasons behind those changes.

England took a leadership role in the world’s modern education of children with disabilities and present-day education based on the concept of special educational needs. That is one reason for examining the changes in that country in the educational system for the blind. Yet, there are two other reasons why the present study focuses on England from the 1930s to the 1940s. One reason is because, in this period in England, schools for the blind aimed to improve their education by nationally reorganizing small, scattered schools. The other reason is because reform of the schools for the blind was promulgated in conjunction with

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reform of the schools for children without disabilities.

In England, in the pre-war era, the educational system had been arranged so as to divide the social classes. However, during the post-war era, after passage of the Education Act of 1944, an educational system was introduced that was based on children’s age, aptitudes, and abilities, rather than social class. In addition, this Act, for the first time in England’s history, included the education of students with disabilities in the same framework as the education of those without disabilities. Even though education was not mandatory for children with disabilities, they were to receive “as far as possible” an education suited to their age, aptitudes, and abilities.

Reorganization of the schools for children with disabilities began in the late 1940s. However, the educational system for the blind was one of the earliest to be reorganized nationally and, after the reorganization, to provide an education that was similar to the education of children without disabilities.

Much has been published on the history of education of the blind in England. Classic works by Illingworth (1910) and Ritchie (1930) on the history of education of the blind are considered seminal. Among comparatively recent literature, the most influential modern work concerning the history of education of the disabled in England, including the blind, is Pritchard’s (1963) work. Also, Rose (1970) covers education and welfare for the blind from the 17th century to the 1960s.

The only publication focused on the education of the blind during the post-war era in relation to school reorganization is Miyauchi (2009). Yet, because her research analyzed the reorganization of the schools for the blind from the perspective of regulations and the financial condition of the Local Education Authorities, how and why the concept of reorganization was formed in the first place and how it was realized still remain to be explicated.

To clarify how schools for the blind changed into large residential schools and the reasons behind this, the present article focuses on organizations and individuals that were closely involved in the process, including charity organizations for the blind, teachers from schools for the blind, and the Board of Education. This research is focused on the period from the mid-1930s to the 1940s, the time in which reorganization of schools for the blind was conceptualized and realized. The primary sources for this research include (a) annual reports of schools for the blind, (b) articles from a nationwide journal for teachers at schools for the blind (Teachers of the Blind), (c) annual reports and personal letters of the largest organization in the education and welfare for the blind, the National Institute for the Blind (NIB), and (d) memoranda of the Board of Education, a government department that has been a largely overlooked source in previous research in this field.

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Pre-War Era Education of for Blind Students

Under section 52 of the Education Act 1921, each Local Education Authority was required to provide education for the blind between the ages of 5 and 16, who were resident in its area (College of Teachers of the Blind & National Institute for the Blind [1936] 19). Education was provided for about 4,600 children at some seventy day schools and large residential schools for the blind, most of which were maintained by various charity organizations. Most of these children obtained their education in “all-age schools” that usually had a philanthropic side, being sponsored by the upper classes; this was also common at the time in the education of students without disabilities (Sanderson [1987] 18). In addition to the all-age schools, there were nursery schools for infants and young children who were blind and secondary schools for students who were blind and academically or musically able. In other words, there were various kinds of day and residential schools for the blind, targeting a range of ages from infants to those preparing to enter a university. Viewed in this manner, the educational provisions in England for the blind were “reasonably complete” (College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind [1936] 6).

In England at that time, the education of the blind differed very much in the direction of its development from that in the United States. For example, whereas schools in the United States for the blind were moving towards separating their welfare and educational functions by separating the schools from the training departments, many of the schools in England maintained training departments and sheltered workshops. The type of employment available at that time for adults who were blind was solely manual work in secondary industries, work that was easily affected by changes in the price of raw materials and consumer demand. Usually after blind pupils finished compulsory education at the age of 16, they went on to the training department of the same school for four more years, where they learned manual work such as basket weaving or mattress making, which then led to employment at a sheltered workshop for the blind or to a job as a home worker (Howard [1945] 132–134).

Conceptualization of the Reorganization and Its Background

Diverse Children and Limitations of Education

The Board of Education’s 1938 statistics indicate that out of 3,393 pupils in schools for the blind nationwide in England, only 1,364 were Braille users. This meant that although the Cowley Report (Board of Education, 1934) had suggested that students who were blind or partially sighted should be educated separately due to the different writing and reading medium that they use, many partially sighted pupils were still in schools for the blind (Yorkshire School for the Blind, 1938; Board of Education [1938b] 120–121).
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In addition, there were some “backward children” among the students in the schools for the blind (Board of Education [1938b] 5). At the time, the Board of Education’s view of children with intellectual disabilities was that they were ineducable. Therefore, teachers at schools for the blind were supposed to contact the Local Educational Authority to report students who were blind and who were not making progress, so that the students could be relocated (Board of Education [1938b] 5). However, most of the time, it appears to have been difficult for teachers at the schools for the blind to decide whether the reason that a child was not making any progress was because the child had an intellectual disability. Therefore, in most schools for the blind, special classes were set up for such children (Board of Education [1930] 3).

In other words, there were children of different ages, abilities, and visual conditions in the schools for the blind. Many of the schools attempted to tackle that problem by streaming the pupils into classes based on their abilities. For example, at the Royal Victoria School for the Blind, all 67 pupils enrolled were classified as follows, depending on their age and abilities: kindergarten class, and Class I, III, and IV (Board of Education [1930] 3).

However, due to the limited number of teachers and facilities, not enough provision was made for the diversity of the pupils. For example, a school inspector who visited the Royal Normal College pointed out that different subdivisions within a class were confusing and made it more difficult for the teachers to understand individual children (Board of Education [1931] 4–8; Board of Education [1938b] 2).

In addition, the number of blind children had fallen since 1925 by nearly 38% (Wood, 1938), and, following this, many schools operated at less than capacity. Consequently, to tackle the problem, there was a need for a radical reform which involved the entire school system for the blind.

Reorganization Concept and Process of Drafting the Idea

Formation of the reorganization concept (1936). In 1936, the College of Teachers of the Blind (CTB) and its partner, the National Institute for the Blind (NIB), published Education of the blind: A survey (1936). The College of Teachers of the Blind was established 1907 to promote and encourage the training of teachers of the blind and raise the status and the character of education of the blind (Illingworth [1910] 150). The National Institute for the Blind was one of the oldest and largest voluntary bodies in England, established in 1868 (National Institute for the Blind, 1938). Their 344-page survey (College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind, 1936) contains six chapters, covering important problems in education for the blind, such as the ideology of education, the curriculum, and employment.

The survey report (College of Teachers of the Blind and the National Institute for the Blind, 1936) claimed that the current education system was making progress in the education of the blind “unnecessarily difficult”, and
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insisted that existing schools for the blind should be reorganized into a “few
large residential schools” that would reflect the children’s age, aptitudes, and
ability. The report expressed the hope that this would not only increase the
efficiency of the education of the blind, but also give each pupil the “opportunity
of following the line in which his aptitudes would make success most likely”.

Moreover, the report (College of Teachers of the Blind and the National
Institute for the Blind, 1936) also urged that the education of students who are
blind should strive to “minimize[d] the snobbishness of the bookish student and
insist on the pride of craft in the industrial”, and contended that, even if a child
were later to become a manual worker, reorganization of the schools would
result in giving “the future manual worker such educational pabulum” (College

Drafting the Concept by the National Institute for the Blind (1938–1939)

The concept of reorganization had been developed, yet, at first, not much
action was seen in its implementation. However, in 1938, two years after the
publication of the survey, an incident pushed the reorganization concept forward.

The London Society for Teaching and Training the Blind, a charity organiza-
tion, suggested to the Board of Education that a new school for the blind be
built in Manchester. Purse and Eagar, members of the National Institute for the
Blind who had also been involved in the preparation of the survey, claimed that
this proposal was unnecessary, if not “harmful”, and objected to the idea. Their
reason for objecting was that Manchester already had eight schools for the blind,
with vacancy rates in excess of 33% (Board of Education, 1938a; Purse, 1938).

Purse and Eagar began to approach Warr and Underwood of the Board of
Education by writing to them repeatedly, from the spring of 1938 to 1939. At
least four letters that they wrote describe in detail the diminishing number of
children who were blind and the need for classification of children (Eagar,
1938a, 1938b, 1938c; Purse, 1938).

In December 1938, their efforts were fully rewarded when a meeting with
Underwood and five other members of the Board of Education was held to
discuss and draft a reorganization plan for the schools for the blind. In that
meeting, Purse mentioned the need for reorganizing the existing schools into a
few large residential schools, the very concept that had been mentioned in the
1936 survey. Moreover, he discussed and emphasized the merits of the reorgani-
zation for not only the education of students who were blind, but for the whole
country, by mentioning how this could prevent public money from going to
waste. This conversion, led by Purse, who was apparently a very articulate man,
successfully won the support of the Board of Education for the reorganization of
schools for the blind (Board of Education [1938a] 4–5).

Although Eagar and Purse took the lead in the realization of the reorgani-
zation, much of this was not explained to the teachers and staff members at the
schools for the blind. For example, Myers, the head teacher of the Birmingham
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Royal School for the Blind, described how most of the reorganization discussions were “prepared behind the scenes” and remarked how this reorganization plan may well be a “surprise” and even a “dismay”, since it had been kept so secret (Myers [1942] 54). Moreover, Myers (1942) complained that the College of Teachers of the Blind, a partner of National Institute for the Blind in publishing the survey (College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind, 1936), was taking no active interest in furthering the suggested idea of reorganizing the schools, a situation that he found “disquieting” (Myers [1942] 54).

From the above, it appears that the reorganization plan was done mainly in a rather clandestine fashion by members of the National Institute for the Blind who had been involved in publishing the survey (College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind, 1936).

Indeed, why was the College of Teachers of the Blind, the first author of the Survey, so passive in furthering the idea of reorganization? One possible conjecture can be drawn from the following. First, Myers, who was actively involved with the College of Teachers of the Blind, remarked that he felt a “good deal of unnecessary friction between the College and the Institute” (Myers [1942] 56). Second, the chairman of the College of Teachers of the Blind and the Secretary of the London Society for Teaching and Training the Blind (the organization that had suggested to the Board of Education that a new school be built) were actually the same person, Ritchie. This suggests that opposition to the outlook for the education of the blind may have existed or even appeared between the two organizations in the process of formulating the reorganization idea.

**Drafting the Concept by the Board of Education and the Schools for the Blind (1939–1945)**

From 1939, the concept of reorganization of the schools for the blind started to be drafted, involving the Board of Education and all the schools for the blind. The Board of Education started to hold regional meetings with the members of the schools for the blind to discuss the reorganization plan in detail (see Table 1).

It was discussed above that reorganizing the education of the blind according to the children’s age, abilities, and aptitudes originated out of a need for increasing educational efficiency in the mid 1930s. Yet, in the 1940s, the school reorganization itself took on a more important meaning for the education of the blind.

For example, in 1943, Butler, the Minister of Education at that time, published a White Paper titled *Education Reconstruction*. The document stated the following guiding principles for England’s post-war education:

> [T]o secure for children a happier childhood and a better start in life; to ensure a fuller measure of education and opportunity for young people, and to provide means for all of developing the various talents with which they are endowed and so enriching the inheritance of the country whose citizens they are. (Maclure [1986] 206)
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**TABLE 1** Dates of Regional Conferences on Reorganization of the Schools for Students Who Are Blind

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 4, 1939</td>
<td>North Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 21, 1945</td>
<td>North West Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23, 1945</td>
<td>London and South East Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 9, 1945</td>
<td>South West Region</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To achieve this purpose, the White Paper proposed reorganizing the educational system into primary and secondary schools, and having the secondary schools branch into three types: grammar schools, technical schools, and modern schools, which children would enter according to their age, aptitudes, and abilities.

Eagar, the secretary general of the National Institute for the Blind, quoted the White Paper in the National Institute for the Blind’s journal, *The New Beacon*, as a “revolutionary document” (Eagar [1943] 138–139). He also stated, “We must emphasize the right of blind children to gain as much from the new educational order as other children”, saying that this was the educator’s “plain duty” (Eagar [1943] 138–139).

Why did Eagar strive to reorganize the schools for the blind in the same manner as the regular schools? Eagar stated the importance of reorganizing the education of the blind as follows:

Blind children have been taken out of the ordinary run; they have for the most part to go to residential schools. Our problem, in essence, is to make sure that they do not become a peculiar people. (Eagar [1943] 138–139)

In short, reorganizing the schools for the blind was a way of keeping up with developments in the education of children without disabilities, and this was done so that blind would not seen as a “peculiar” group.

However, if this matter is closely examined, the social significance of the reorganization can also be speculated about. For example, the reorganization proposal presented in the White Paper contained the meaning of banning the educational system that had reflected social class and which had existed predominantly in England to that time. Thus, the reorganization would ensure equal educational opportunity for all children, regardless of their social or economic status. Furthermore, the reorganization also contained the meaning of preparing children for democratic citizenship (Anonymous [1943] 3; Sugano [1974] 133–134).

To equip children to become democratic citizens and build up a democratic society had a very important meaning in post-war England, because, for England, World War II was a “war against fascism”, a war fighting Germany, Italy, and Japan Axis powers that had suppressed democracy within their countries, in
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order to protect and secure democracy (Kihara [2003] 365). In fact, in all the various systems that were promulgated for citizens during this period (e.g., the welfare and education systems), it can be seen that “democracy” and “democratic citizenship” were almost like catchwords.

In other words, for people who were blind, reorganizing the school system for the blind so that it would be like the regular school system had the important meaning of preparing children who were blind to become citizens of a democracy, an indispensable factor in becoming “non-peculiar” people.

Realization of the Reorganization and Background Factors

The Education Act of 1944 and the Realization of School Reorganization

After Butler submitted the White Paper to Parliament in 1943, the new education law, the Education Act of 1944, was finally approved and came into effect on August 3, 1944.

With the new law in effect, at regional conferences such as the one in the north west region on February 21, the London and south east conference on July 23, and the south west one on October 9, specific measures were discussed, based on the principles of the new act. By 1947, the seventy schools from the prewar period had been reduced to 16, all becoming residential schools.

Background Factors of the Reorganization

Initiative of the National Institute for the Blind. This section of the present article examines factors that made this reorganization possible. One of those factors certainly was the initiative of the National Institute for the Blind and the existence of two key persons, Purse and Eagar. It could be argued that it was almost natural that the National Institute for the Blind took the lead. This is true partly because it was the biggest organization and had economic power compared to the other organizations concerned about the blind. However, both Purse and Eagar also realized the key that made the reorganization possible: they were not only articulate but also patient in the process of letting the idea of reorganization mature. This interpretation is corroborated by the following statement by Eagar about how the reorganization planning should be conducted:

It [reorganization] is a matter for dispassionate judgment based on examination of the facts, reliable forecasts of the future population trend and the application of agreed principles (Eagar, 1938a).

Educators’ high hopes for radical change. Characteristics of the times were also important in making the reorganization possible. When the planning for the reorganization began, there were both a shortage of raw materials due to the war and a change in the industrial structure in England. The short supply of raw materials and the increased use of machinery in factories reduced the demand for hand craftsmanship (Edkins [1942] 149–150). As a result, in 1932, many fully
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trained adults who were blind had already become unemployed (Whitehead [1935] 115). These growing problems were often shared and discussed in the journal of the College of Teachers of the Blind, because they were becoming a serious concern in the education of the blind.

At the same time, a new path emerged in the education of the blind. Because of the war, making the fullest possible use of available labor was in the national interest, and some selected work in munitions factories became an avenue of employment for people who were blind (Edkins [1942] 149–159). In addition, it was becoming evident that many people who were blind could work in conditions identical to those where people who did not have disabilities worked (Fenelon [1944] 79–81). Hence, the time that the reorganization was being planned coincided with the time when, for the first time in history, workers who were blind were being accepted in ordinary industries. Slowly, the possibility of workers who were blind becoming an economic unit was being realized (Edkins [1942] 149–159).

In conclusion, these features raised the expectations of concerned parties that radical change would ensue with the reorganization of the system of education for the blind.

Conclusions

First, the reorganization plan was conceived in the survey (College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind, 1936) and also supported by renowned members of the Board of Education. In addition, behind the concept of reorganization, there was a need for raising the educational efficiency of the schools for the blind. That need became apparent in the mid-1930s when a decrease began in the number of blind children.

Second, the reorganization plan started to be discussed in detail two years after the publication of the survey (College of Teachers of the Blind and the National Institute for the Blind, 1936) by two concerned persons, Purse and Eagar. Their articulateness and patience were important factors in pushing the national reorganization forward.

Moreover, realizing the reorganization was important for the education of the blind because making schools that would fit all children meant preparing children who were blind to become democratic citizens just like children without disabilities. The reorganization was pushed forward on the National Institute for the Blind’s initiative, with Eagar and Purse taking the lead, and also by adult members of society who were blind, because they had high hopes for more job opportunities.

Finally, further research on the following topic is needed. The present study could not cover discussions that took place among the different schools for the blind and organizations concerning education for the blind. For example, teachers at schools like the Swiss Cottage and the Worcester School for the Blind
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were very much against reorganizing the schools for the blind. Their argument was that reorganizing the schools in terms of the children's age, abilities, and aptitudes would result in academically or musically able students going to other schools, which would result in taking away the liveliness of the schools for the blind. Although only very limited primary sources are available on this topic, analyzing the arguments that took during the process of formation of the reorganization plan in more detail would most likely result in a better understanding of the reorganization and its significance.

Endnotes

1) In the present article, phrases such as "the blind", "the disabled", and "schools for the blind" are used because those were the expressions in use at the time on which this historical study focuses (1930s–1940s).

2) A home worker scheme was available for people who were blind who wished to live at home and pursue manual trades rather than work in a sheltered workshop.

3) Wood (1938) does not mention specific numbers of children. However, in the statistics in the Survey (College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind, 1936), it can be seen that the number of children who were blind decreased from 2,451 in 1928 to 1,676 by 1938.

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