# **Right to inclusive education episode 7**

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**Neven Milivojevic:** Welcome to the Rights Reporting Podcast. This is a show aiming to improve the rights of blind and partially sighted citizens in Europe. And my name is Neven Milivojevic and I will be the host of today. And today we have a theme of a very important right that is the right to Education in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The CRPD recognises this in its Article 24 the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities. But what does this mean actually, and what measures are needed to make it possible? Well, as you all know, political visions sometimes do not turn into reality, and that is why we need to speak about how to make this more possible in Europe. Today, we will meet two experts. We have two distinguished guests, one from Portugal and one from Sweden. And we will listen to them about their efforts on barriers and challenges, but also about possibilities and tools for solutions. Before we introduce them, I would like to take your attention to that we should listen to Kevin Kjelldahl, who is recently graduated from his upper secondary school in west Sweden, and we asked him about what were his experiences in relation to inclusive education as a blind student.

**Kevin Kjelldahl:** As a child, I started going to school just like all the other kids in Sweden. In my country, we have the opportunity to attend school for 12 years without paying any fees until we finish upper secondary school. Being in school can work quite differently depending on where you live, as each region has its own regulations.

For me, it worked out rather well overall. But one thing that was a bit difficult was the part concerning social relations, because things develop quite quickly and it's not always easy to follow what the others are doing during the breaks. When you're little, you can run around playing with the other kids, but when you're older, most people just sit and watch YouTube videos during those breaks. I found it was more difficult in upper secondary school compared to primary school and lower secondary school because you're supposed to take more responsibility for yourself from upper secondary school and onwards in Sweden. However, things do not always work out that way, unfortunately. For instance, I had a very bad English teacher who could not give me the help and support that I needed in the classroom. She did not describe what she drew and wrote on the whiteboard, and she gave me texts to read as PDF files, which is not a very accessible format for me. I would have preferred to get those texts as word files. And because of this, I had to do an English course during two years instead of the normal one year period for that course. That was not so helpful for my motivation. I also think it's very important to be able to influence the choice of pupil support assistant at the earliest age possible because you're supposed to be able to cooperate with that person and each person knows best what kind of support that he or she need.

Even in my case, for instance, I got a person who had dyslexia as a pupil support assistant, which was perhaps not the best thing for me. I took extra courses apart from the compulsory ones and it did not work very well to have someone who had reading and writing difficulties when I needed help writing something, or in some cases also reading something or having someone to help me explain certain mathematical terms for instance. However, I feel that I've always had great support from using Braille and that is good to know when I hear about other cases where people did not have the support that they needed to learn Braille. One explanation could be that I've always wanted to learn how to read ever since I was a small child. So, I've always made sure to keep in contact with the Swedish National Agency for special needs in educations and schools. That's it for me. Thank you for listening to my story.

**Neven Milivojevic:** I would like to welcome our two guests for today's podcast. First, we have Ms. Ana Sofia Antunes, the Secretary of State for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Portugal. Most welcome ms Antunes. We also have Ms. Malin Ekman Aldén, the director general at the Swedish Agency for Participation. Most welcome. Let's start with you, Malin. What are your reflections when you been listening to Kevin's story? How would you describe the challenges with inclusive education in Sweden?

**Malin Ekman Aldén:** I think from my perspective, there are different challenges and I think he's catching them quite well. The one of the basic challenges is, of course, to have equal access to the education, to materials, to an inclusive environment that actually enable you to learn and study in the same conditions as other students. And I think there are many barriers still to be moved, removed to ensure that visually impaired young people are getting the same opportunities and would also have the same opportunities to achieve the best possible result that they would need for further education and for their working life and so on. So, there are a lot of practical things around technical devices obviously, also book literature, accessible literature, but also teachers that can actually teach in a way that is inclusive, that you can follow what is happening in the classroom and also be able to take part in different activities that are taking place. I think that's really basic. That's why we go to school. But I think school is also a place where you are socially preparing for adult life and further education, working life. And so inclusive, from my point of view, inclusion is also to be socially included.

And I think that is a great challenge for many visually impaired young people that they are in a way placed in the ordinary school system. But the environment and how things are actually structured around their extra need for support is not really supporting social inclusion that they are very easily very isolated. Maybe because of lacking practical opportunities. They have to spend much too much time with homework, actually only getting access to quite, you know, basic things. And that can also mean that after school you would end up with not enough confidence and social skills to be actually well prepared for what you are going to do further on. And I think that is also something that has to be noted because social skills and the ability to actually interact in a in a sighted society is really, really important actually, to be successful and confident in the further situation. And that is also part, at least in Sweden, that's even written as a basic principle in the national curriculum and is also a very important thing that schools must provide and support also for children with disabilities.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Exactly and he actually mentioned this and so you are putting our spot on very important thing so. Well Ms. Antunes, what would you say about the situation in Portugal, for instance if Kevin would have gone to school there, would his experiences have been similar? And would you say there are some what would be the main challenges in Portugal when it comes to inclusive education?

**Ana Sofia Antunes:** First of all, I would like to thank for this opportunity to be here in this podcast. Well, I'd like to start by saying that probably the main challenges on about inclusive education are so similar considering the realities of the different countries, especially when we are talking about European countries that have a good level of procedures related to inclusion. In Portugal, we have a very concrete way done in the area of inclusive education. Our first experiences in the inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular schools are from the decades of 70 and 80 of the last century. And of course, as I think that happened in other different European countries, we have started with the children with sensorial and physical disabilities. It is a process that took time, but during the years it is established. And currently, of course, we still have challenges, but we can say that we had success in this process. In this moment we had 98% of our children with disabilities included in the regular schools. And our experiences with the special schools are so few. And we really think that probably in some years, not so much years, we probably will not have more these special schools. In spite of it, in 2008, we did a big reflection considering this subject and we concluded that our main challenge was the children with mental and cognition disabilities, because these specific children were not included in our regular schools.

So with the new legislation approved in this year 2008, we established this obligation and is only considering this determination, this new legislation that we all today can say and can have this level, these numbers of inclusion. And when I talk about inclusion, I'm using the correct words because what I felt when I start my functions in the Portuguese government six years ago was that, of course, when we talk about intellectual and cognitive disabilities, we had the capability to move these children to the regular schools, of course, but we didn't construct inclusion. We construct integration. But many times what we saw is that these children, in spite of being in the regular school, they were not really included in these spaces, in these educational communities. More frequently that we would like to recognize these children were there, but they were not attending the classroom, they were not with their colleagues, with the other pupils. So it was a new evolution that we had to do. With the more regulation approved in 2018 that approved new obligations to the schools, of course, new resources. But one of the main impulses in positions that we still establish with this new legislation was the obligation that all the children, in spite of their specific disability, had to stay in their own classroom with their regular teachers and with their colleagues, a minimum of 70% of the week school period.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Well, that's most interesting. But if we then move on to maybe how we should combat these challenges, which you both have seen in your respective countries, for instance, Ms. Aldén, what would be the main successful tools to reach more inclusion or more inclusive education in your view?

**Malin Ekman Aldén:** I think there are several tools needed. I mean, obviously you need resources enough in the schools and in the system and resources is obviously money, but it's also enough training and well, training and developing opportunities not only for the students but also for the teachers and also people in directing positions like headmasters and so on. Because at least in Sweden, the headmasters that are directing the schools have a lot of influence in actually how things are organized and how resources are distributed. So that's very important. And there also, I think an important thing that at least in Sweden is a great discussion is that you need enough staff because if you have too big groups, classes or so on and not enough teachers and maybe other support staff, it's very difficult to actually meet the needs of each pupil. And that is really the basic thing to be able to have a good inclusive environment that each person not depending on if you have a disability or it could be other things you would have a special need around. You have to be met where you actually are and where your capacity is. So I think that is really important and, and there is a lot of training needed not only to be able to actually, you know, in a practical sense meet the needs of children with disabilities, but other children with other needs obviously.

But you also need a lot of, you know, be a bit creative and also have a good understanding on how actually situation could be in different with different needs. And I think teachers are really a key, key factor to ensure that inclusion is working and this needs to be, you know, addressed very early in school age, I think starting very early with kids creating an environment where there is space and interest for each one and where you actually also organise everything is good, not only the classrooms but also in the breaks, in the PE. Whatever different things you have in the school curriculum has to consider that everybody must have the opportunity to actually be a part on equal conditions. I think the teachers have a really crucial impact to ensure that because often if you have a child with a disability, you are actually trying to solve the situation by maybe appointing an assistant or a supporting person in the classroom. And instead of actually working with a whole group, the whole class, you are in a way like taking the child out and, you know, solving things on the side that does not promote inclusion from my point of view.

You have to be so that teachers have the tools, the knowledge, the understanding, and enough time and resources is really a key to achieve inclusion. So I think this is really the important thing. But I have to come back to the thing of socializing because I think sometimes you are so much focusing on the academic situation, which is obviously very important and there are why you are in school, but you to ensure a good academic situation, you also need to pinpoint other things in school like the social situation. Because when we have looked at the situation of children with disabilities in Sweden, in Swedish schools, we can see that there is a great number of harassments bullying like not good psychiatric well-being in this group. And that is not because the classroom is not working always, but that is very much because like the breaks, the afternoons, whatever you are, how the school is organised, that there is a lot of things happening outside the classroom that is really affecting the self-confidence of the child, but also the opportunity to actually learn. So I think that is really important.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Very much so. Thank you. Ms. Antunes, from your point of view, what would be the main successful tools for, for instance, implementing the CRPD's Article 24?

**Ana Sofia Antunes:** Well, recently we approved in Portugal our National Strategic Strategy on inclusion of persons with disabilities 2025. And in these political documents, we try to organize it as much as possible in the same line as the CRPD and as the European Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recently approved to. Our main challenges are described and present in this document. We think that, of course we have done a good way, but we all always have more and more that we can done to transform the experience of the children with disability in regular schools in a really inclusive experience. So one of the big challenges that we are facing in this moment is that we organize this inclusion process based on a net of reference schools. Considering this proposal that as long as we know that it's difficult to have all the technologies and all the technical resources in all the schools so we established a group, a large group of these reference school, that priority should be attended by these students. It is easy to do in the big cities, of course, but it's really difficult to maintain this position when we are talking about interior of the country because we have some places where the children with disabilities have to travel today, more than 80 to 100 kilometres to attend the school and it's not acceptable in the 21st century, of course. So now we have this challenge of bringing more schools to this net, to this reality. And we have to give to these new schools all the conditions to correctly receive and include students with disabilities.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Has these political frameworks like the CRPD and the European have been of help to you. Do you find them helpful in the work of process changing development?

**Ana Sofia Antunes:** Of course. Of course. They are really useful. And in the work that we are strictly done with the Education ministry in Portugal. For you to understand the state secretary is included in the employment solidarity and Social Security ministry. But we of course, we try to do a transversal work with different areas of the government. And one of the strongest part of the work that I always have been done is with the Ministry of Education. And we also know that when we are preparing these schools to receive a new student. We have different challenges to face, the first of all, and the more simple to solve is the human resources. Of course, they all ask us not for specific or technical, not to teachers or special education teachers, but the most frequently is to ask about support staff. For example, in this moment, with the strong process of inclusion of children with autism, different autism spectrum, this need of specific staff to contain these children in the classroom is one of the most frequent. Only to conclude, I think our main challenge is to overcome this difficulty. I don't know if we have a specific tool, but we have to be imaginative and we have to be capable to always find new solutions. And our biggest tool, I think our biggest challenge I continue to say that are our minds. In a moment in the 21st century, when I have some families of children with disability trying to defend a returning process to special schools because they think that the children don’t need to be in the regular classrooms, that they doesn't have to have contact with the children without disability. This is the biggest challenge that we have to face are the mentalities, the minds, and to find new pathways, new ways to continue this combat that the inclusion.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you. So, Ms. Aldén, Kjelldahl, he mentioned how important Braille was to him that he actually very early accomplished to learn this. And I was just wondering, do you have any point of view of how important this could be too and do you assess that this is a opportunity which is widely given to pupils who would be able to use it in their life?

**Malin Ekman Aldén:** I think like if you are a blind person Braille is absolutely essential because that is your like, reading language, right? I think too many young people today are actually denied Braille because there are so many quite cheap and accessible solutions that are more focusing on hearing because that's in a way a cheaper and more easy way of solving the problem that you are actually listening to a lot of things. But if you don't, if you only listen to things during your schooling, you will not be able to spell, you will not be able to understand how foreign names are actually spelled and looking. There are so many things you are actually missing out in a way, you are becoming a bit of a what you call it in English an alphabetic if you don't have access to Braille. And I think in Sweden, the access to Braille is an upcoming problem. Because when a lot of people who were actually very much promoting Braille and also experts in this field are maybe retiring now and there is not a haven't been enough, you know, emphasis on Braille because the groups using Braille in Sweden, at least because we

are a small country, very, very few children today become blind, completely blind and Braille users. But for them who are or will become Braille users in older ages it's absolutely essential, to actually be able to perform and to have a good education.

So I think that together with other skills like mobility, is really crucial if you have a visual impairment. For visually, partially sighted people like myself, computers can really solve a lot because you can have, you know, larger print, which was not so available before computing age, which as I am very old, but today you can and that will really be a help to especially to learn spelling and also to learn foreign languages, which is a key thing actually in the modern world, especially here in Europe. So I think that is that is a problem as he's explaining and also the opportunity to actually use Braille through, you know, through materials that is available is very limited. And I think there is some technical development and you can do them more like automatically Braille copies nowadays. But still there is a lot of need to develop further the techniques and also the availability.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you, Ms. Aldén I will give you a last word on just briefly telling us about what the agency do, which you are Director General. But before that, I wanted to ask Ms. Antunes, as I know you are a Braille user, what your experiences are and the importance of Braille for those who need it in school on this topic.

**Ana Sofia Antunes:** Yes, I'm a braille user since my early age, since six years old. In this subject, I only can agree and reinforce absolutely the words of Ms Aldén so it's really, really necessary. It's really important that a child, a blind child in the educational process since the first time since the first year has contact with the braille because an educational process done only based in listening process it's not possible. The first reason is obviously the, I don't know how it says in English, but the orthography. How do you spell the words? How do you spell it? And how do you write it? And of course, it will have consequences in the future of a blind child, a blind youth, blind adult, when he will be, for example, applying for a job. But not only for this reason, of course, because all the learning process will be put in place when you don't have the correct contact with the learning, with the language that you use. I'm a Braille user since my early age, of course, I also use large print in some contexts. And of course, in Portugal we also have this challenge because we have a few number of children fortunately, of course, that was born totally blind. In the first years when we promoted the transition of these children from the special to the regular schools. We have a problem here because we didn't have a technical staff experts in Braille in these regular schools. So these children, in the first years of the transition, didn't have the correct contact with Braille. Now the reality is not so bad. Of course, now we have had time in the last 15 years, ten years to promote the formation of many technical staff in Braille. But I think it's not enough. And of course, we need to complement this learning process with access to technical technological devices to try that children continue to use the Braille during their lives.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you very much, Ms. Antunes. And yes, and that's why it's really good that we have, for instance, a CRPD where it's really stated that there have to be a provision with teaching of Braille when necessary. So that's really good tool. Now, I wanted to put the last question to Ms. Aldén, because we do understand what Secretary of State and Governmental Ministries is doing, but maybe for some of our listeners, The Agency for participation is something we don't necessarily know immediately what it is. So could you very briefly tell us then what you are Director General of?

**Malin Ekman Aldén:** Yeah, sure, I'll try. The agency is a governmental agency and our job is really to support the parliament and government in Sweden in following up on the national disability policy, but also to support because it's a cross-cutting policy that is actually pinpointing all different sectors of the society. So we are also commissioned to actually support the different sectors to develop their work to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities and the basis for the policy and for our work obviously is the CRPD. And that has then been developed in a national decision passed by Parliament a few years ago where it's a bit developed on how this should be done. So that is really what we do and we do this in different ways. We are following up on the basis of different statistics and data obviously. But we are also doing different kind of surveys and interviews and our understanding our idea of how you actually understand the impact and the result of a disability policy is that you have to start with actually involving and talking to the people that are affected in the end, the end users like people with own disabilities and their organisations and through their story on how the policy is actually working or not working, then you can complete with and you can deepen the understanding through data and different kind of qualitative studies.

So that is actually how we work. And I think also in the field of we've been monitoring very many different sectors, but education is something that we are coming back to all the time because education and the right to employment is maybe the most basic things actually to achieve more an inclusive life on a long time basis. And when we talk about education, a follow up and education, we have also done a lot of studies based actually on talking to the students themselves, like Kevin that we started up with, because I think in both understanding the situation in education system, but also to find the right kind of solutions you need actually to talk to the students, I think, because it's quite different to be an adult like myself. Even though I was a visually impaired student many years ago, I do not have the right understanding on what solutions are actually working for the children or the child or the student, so you need to actually involve them themselves. And we tried also to use this kind of methodology in our work, also in other areas, but also in the education field. So that's very, very briefly what we are doing.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you very, very much, both of you. It has been most inspiring and I think both of you are highly knowledgeable within this field, and I think you'll be an great inspiration to our listeners all over Europe. So most grateful we are. But before we end today's episode, I would like to remind you that there is a new platform which is related to the field of Braille. Are you new in Braille and want to grasp the idea of dots on paper or on a Braille display? Are you interested in methods of Braille teaching and training? Do you want to get to know something about new devices using Braille to communicate, or do you wish to obtain inspiration about Braille games or toys for your visually impaired child or pupil at school? Well, or maybe you are an expert and you do have some special experiences with using Braille you would like to share with others. Then the European Blind Union's web space is for you. Let's create one place with all the information about Braille in Europe. Buzzing with news. Visit livingbraille dot EU that is spelled l i v i n g b r a i double l e dot eu so livingbraille dot EU and dive into the Braille world.

**Neven Milivojevic:** Thank you very much for listening to the Rights Reporting Podcast. This show is part of a European PARVIS project and is led by the European Blind Union, the Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired and the Eye Association of the Netherlands. The project is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of a European Union. Did you get curious and would like to know more? Well then you can find our contact details in the show notes. Thank you also to Emiel Cornelisse, who is our sound master and located in the Netherlands. This was the last episode in the first season of the Rights Reporting podcast. If you missed any of our six episodes, you will be able to find them in your podcast player or on the web page of a European Blind Union. We wish you all good health and success in your work and commitment for an equal society. Have a good day.

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