**In the Borderlands**

**Why is it important for partially sighted children to learn Braille?**

**Presented by Ann Jönsson**

Thank you for this opportunity to give my reflections of using Braille as partially sighted.

Just some words about who I am. I have been visually impaired since birth. I live in Stockholm and work as project manager at the Nordic Welfare Centre, an institution under the Nordic governments cooperating within the social policy field. I am also a board member of the Swedish Association of the Visually impaired. During this presentation I would like to focus on the following points:

* My experience of a life with two written languages
* Using Braille in my professional life
* To be partially sighted – living in a borderland and risk to be without a written language
* The importance of inspiring partially sighted children to learn Braille
* The technical development – future challenges

Today, Braille is a natural part of my life, just as natural as black printed text. I weave my way back and forth between my two forms of written language, depending on what I need to do. I feel a huge amount of confidence and happiness because of this. But it has not always been like that. To be able to see a little bit, like I can, means that you are living in a kind of borderland. You are neither blind nor sighted. For many years, it was very important for me to define myself as fully sighted. I did not walk with a white cane and I did not use Braille, which I had learned as a child. I imagine that I was living like an immigrant who had let go of her native language in the belief and hope of succeeding more easily in her new country. When I finally understood that I needed both of my written languages, I felt like I was finally coming home, like I was becoming a whole person.

I was born in the late 1950:s. At that time, there was no question that visually impaired children should attend a special school. At the age of seven, I was sent to Tomtebodaskolan, which was 600 km from home. My parents realized that we would not have much contact during the school year. They taught me how to read and write so that we could write letters to each other. My aunt, who worked at a bookbindery, made sure that our home was full of story books. A fantastic world opened up to me – in black printed text. I loved to read!

The move to Tomtebodaskolan made me ”blind”. I learned Braille and I enjoyed reading it just as much as I liked to read in my written language from home. I used to lie with a book long after the night staff said goodnight. I read until my fingers were sore. At that time I used a pen, only when I wrote letters to my family.

After a while, I received a weekend family. Erik and Karen gave me “the outside world”, outside the boarding school. They encouraged me to never let go of the letters that I had been taught at home. Erik had been a sailor. He would spread maps across the kitchen table and tell me about places where he had been and about countries where big and revolutionary things took place – Vietnam, Algeria, Czechoslovakia. He said, “Ann, don’t ever stop reading. And don’t forget to use your abilities!” My weekend parents also gave me books.

After five years at Tomtebodaskolan, I returned home. I was so happy and full of expectation and my dream to be like everyone else was very strong. I wanted to cross the border to their side and leave my old boarding school world and everything that it included behind. I hated the thought of walking to school with a shopping cart that could fit the Braille books. All summer, I practiced, so I could read black printed text well enough again and I also practiced my handwriting. I could do it with a magnifying glass, a lamp, and with the book right next to my face. When the autumn came and I went to my school at home, I left Braille behind. I thought it would be forever.

I was a good student. I often heard that my visual impairment was hardly noticeable. That made me happy. I graduated and later got my degree in journalism. When I started working as a reporter at a large newspaper, I decided to speak very little of my visual impairment. I just had to keep up! I remember one time when I was out reporting and I was sitting next to the photographer, pretending to be an absent-minded map-reader! Another time, I spent an evening alone at the office trying to make out the drawings of a new bridge-construction in Stockholm. I read a lot and wrote quickly. In this manner, I kept my professional life going. I got a job at a publishing house where I wrote, edited other people’s texts, and did proofreading!

I was successful professionally, but I was often tired. An inner stress was always present. When I had to present something for an audience I always felt pressured, afraid to lose control, and afraid to lose my words.

My life, and my view of who I wanted to be, started to change when I became a mother. Being responsible for a new little life became so much more important than continuing to play the roll of someone who was fully sighted. I started to use my white cane more often. I was also forced to consider how I used my energy. I returned to Braille. Big words, but eventually I started to feel harmonious.

I felt a new sense of peace, both professionally and personally. In my previous job as advisor and speechwriter for two cabinet ministers in the Swedish government – and now as project manager at a Nordic institution - I have been forced to work under a lot of pressure. Of course I am often tense when faced with my duties, but I still feel secure thanks to the fact that I now master my form of expression.

So, I use to say that I am NOT so grateful for my five years at an institution – but I am very happy for the opportunity to learn Braille as a child. I am sure that it changed my life, in a very, very positive way.

I am a board member of the Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired, SRF. Our right to a good education – and to a written language – is a vital issue for our organisation. Synthetic speech, smartphones and computers have been a big revoluttion for blind and partially sighted people. But – there is a risk that we trust these technical devices so much, that we lose our written language. And perhaps there is a particular risk if you – as in my situation – are in a kind of borderland. You are neither blind nor sighted. I can still remember all the reflections and questions about identity that I had as a young girl, of course like many other young people. Today, I am so glad that I had Braille in my fingers when I became an adult and finally realized that I needed it. An important task for our organisation, SRF, is that the right to receive education in braille would be regulated by law, like in Norway. We are also convinced of the importance of inspiring partially sighted children to learn Braille. All children has to be guaranteed a written language.

Let me finish this presentation with an episode from my prefoessional life – to illustrate what Braille means in my life.

It was a very special day. Many people had gathered at the large hotel in Sri Lanka’s capital Colombo. – from the government, the authorities, and from organizations. The Sri Lankan government was going to present a strategy for the disability policy for the coming ten years. Organizations in both Sweden and Sri Lanka had worked together for a long time in order to make this happen.

It was my task to deliver the opening speech on behalf of Sweden. My friend Asanga, also interpreter, and I were packed together in the pulpit. Papers were spread out in front of us – my manuscript in Braille, my English text, his Sinhalese translation. I was nervous, touched by the solemnity of the moment. A moment ago, I lit the oil lamp at the front of the stage. This is an honor and a tradition when something great is about to take place. I took a deep breath, with my hands resting on my manuscript. In the middle of all the excitement, I still felt calm – I know that I have the words in my fingers.

Thank you for listening.