

Case study: Project “Art-social children’s center”

NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION: Theatrical and social formation “Flower”

MISSION/OBJECTIVES OF ORGANIZATION & DESCRIPTION OF YOUR WORK (*What is its purpose, who do you normally work with, how many people do you work with, what type of activities are you normally involved in?*)

The mission of the organization:

1. Creation of conditions for the future positive inclusion of the young people in social life, regardless of their background and status (including such without parental care, with physical disabilities and learning difficulties, with deviating behavior, victims of violence and military conflicts)
2. Activation of society for the purpose of resolving young people’s problems
3. Introduction of art and derivative contemporary psycho-social art techniques in the social, educational and health work with young people

Specific objectives of the organization:

To conduct non-formal civil education among the young people

To support the integration of minorities

To transfer and disseminate good practices in forum theatre

To enrich, update and improve its repertoire, in concert with the needs of various groups

Activities:

- Development and implementation of artistic, social, educational and health projects
- Development and dissemination of professional and youth theatre performances of our students
- Organisation, implementation and participation in national and international seminars, conferences, training courses and workshops for youth trainers (students and professionals), artists, social workers and youth-workers
- Adaptation and introduction of good artistic practices for positive social changes

- Development and involvement in national and international networks of organisations with similar activities
- Organisations, implementation and participation in national and international media events, focused on the resolution of youth problems
- interaction with state and regional institutions, non-governmental organisations, universities, cultural institutions, media in the country and abroad.

<http://theatretsvete.eu/>

PROJECT NAME:

Project “Art-social children’s center”

PARTICIPANTS: *(Who took part? What age? How many? What ages? Gender? Description of participants (children/ elderly/ special needs/ particular ethnicity/ deprived etc?)*

12-14 children aged 7 to 15 – blind children and children with visual impairment (v.i.), boys and girls.

AIMS: *(What were the aims of the projects?)*

The aim of this project was to prove that:

- thanks to extra-curricular work with children who are visually impaired, through the instruments of theatre and performing arts, the sensory experience of the participants, their memory, perceptions, speech, attention, motor skills and abilities for special orientation can be developed, enriched and refined as well as the connection and the relationship with one’s own body be mastered;
- the process of work for the purpose of creating a theatre play increases personal motivation and determination of the children, improves self-esteem and their self-evaluation, develops new skills for social interaction, stimulates the participants to discover ways and personal experiences roads for social activeness.

The project had the objective of challenging the social deficit of children with disabilities, which is not simply a personal but a societal problem. The lack of opportunities for people with disabilities to make social contacts, which our society is still oblivious about and considers as a

family problem, naturally leads to a lack of motivation for social inclusion. The project has the aim of using the potential of art, where everyone can interact.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: *(Describe the activity that took place: What did you do? Where did the project take place? location, organisation etc.) When did you meet? How often did you meet? What was the length of the project?)*

Period: October 2009 – April 2010

The children from the “Louis Braille” school, for whom it was possible to join the group, were those coming from the country-site and staying in the school during the weekend, i.e. living there in a boarding house. The parents of these children do not take them home due to different reasons – mostly due to lack of funds. There are also three children from an institution for parentless children. Many of the children have other challenges besides the visual impairment – physical, mental, behavioral, which means that more than half of the students have multiple disabilities. Approximately one half of the group is completely blind, while the rest suffer from various levels of visual impairment. Only a few of them are able to orient themselves visually in space.

In the beginning the meetings with the children from the school “Louis Braille” took place each Saturday morning, and later on – on Saturday and Wednesday evening, from 2010 – on Saturday and Sunday, and with the approach of the project finale – on each possible occasion. The activities take place in the “game room” – not too spacious, but sufficiently big for our needs, dedicated for exercises and rehabilitation of children with multiple disabilities. This room is equipped with motion exercise tools, which we sometimes use in our work. The meetings usually take place for three hours, without dedicated recess time, but with alternating activities – changing lighter ones with more strenuous ones.

After the first two meetings we form a relatively fixed group of 12-14 children aged 7 to 15. The team does not filter or divide the group (in fact it has not been possible with the group to work with two groups) – all children who are interested and willing to join are welcomed. As it appears the greater age difference and the variations in the intellectual potential of the children create various difficulties during our work. Before New Year the team tries to work in the evenings and some of the children who go home for the weekend manage to join. Unfortunately the evening activities prove to be unsatisfactory, because the daily regime in the school is more

intensive. The evening sessions are shorter; the young people become agitated too easily and then have trouble going to bed, which creates problems for their mentors.

The synergy between music, dance and drama allows us to enter simultaneously the worlds of three arts, which have strong emotional influence on the visually impaired children. The building of artistic skills presents an opportunity for development of the speech technique, the intonation, the facial expressions and the comprehension of the literary text stimulate memory and attention. The musical tasks develop rhythmic skills; the children learn how to control their vocal abilities, while dance helps for harnessing and coordinating movements. Together these elements turn into a perfect basis for the development of social skills in visually impaired children and create attitudes for motivated behavior in front of an audience. During the real action on stage the tutors search for ways for overcoming the differences between the participants, originating from their varying skills, age and reasons for participating.

Experience shows that blind and visually impaired children enjoy and like theatre. The process of creating a play includes several stages and the first exercises focus on presenting the children with the nature of art, its characteristic influence on the spectator. A special approach is required not only for the creation of a feeling of interest towards the art, but also for encouraging the children that they can also be actors, get into roles and images, which is achieved through their motivation for participation in short theatre pieces and games.

When the young people become engrossed in the preparation of a play, the work has to continue with reading and/or listening to a recording of the script, rationalization of its contents and allocation of the roles. When lines are studied it is necessary to take into consideration the abilities and aptness of the v.i. children to imitate ready intonation.

Music-drama works combine movements, mimics, gestures, dances, songs and artistic speech. Their story, music and costumes attract and motivate the children to participate. The process of developing artistic skills includes tasks related to fixing walking and posture deviations, as well as coordination and mastering new movements and special orientation. On the other hand theatre stimulates the cognitive development of children and enriches their visual conceptions. Introduced in addition to the teaching activities, which explain to the children that mimics express the human feelings, are also artistic techniques taking the form of games for passing emotional conditions – joy, sorrow, seriousness, fear, etc.

During the first sessions the team was surprised to find the children spend almost three hours sitting in a circle without getting tired or bored. They seem curious, open towards the team,

some are more communicative, other – shier – but as a general rule – all of them listening carefully. With the course of time this behavior changes drastically. The meetings with the team excite them as a rule, they try to talk each other down, they interrupt themselves in the initial and final circles that mark the exercises. They are very much tempted to break the rules during the games, mainly when they are in a circle, where tolerance and hearing each other are of major importance (for example when they pass a fruit among each other and they need to talk about it without naming it, in order to keep the surprise for the next in line – the third or even the second in line shout out with pleasure the name of the fruit). It is often, even for older kids, to shout without reason, as a way of discharging emotions. None of the attempts made by the team members are able to stop the euphoric shouting and the attempts for sound domination over the others. The moments when the team achieves perfect silence and attention are the moments when a story or a fairy tale is being told – these children are the perfect listeners. They are really susceptible and easily manage all kinds of tasks based on sounds and rhythm.

Getting to know the objects, which accompany a theatre play, together with the costumes, supported by detailed descriptions of the materials, colors, purpose, is a moment charged with excitement and lively interest on behalf of the children. During these activities the team also clarifies how the objects are used (for example, swinging and cutting with a fake swords in short dance choreography, creating a tambourine and drum rhythm, accompanying and enriching the theatrical act and others) and exercises for precise body, head and arms movements are carried out. Attention is paid to the gestures.

These aspects of the sessions broaden the sensory-learning experience of the children, which is extremely important for communication with the world. During the entire process the children are eager to absorb sensory and sound experiences. They touch and study everything, enjoying sounds created by objects that the team members give them and are limitlessly excited by everything that makes a sound. The small cassette-player the team members carry with them is carefully studied. The team notices that the necessary sensory information, which by rule should compensate the lack of visual one, is a great deficit for the kids. Thus for example the 14 year old M. with regular mental development does not know what a “knot” is, which means that he does not connect the world with the knot he is touching. Among the young people there are some who do not remember ever touching blossoming trees. It is challenging and almost impossible for the description to replace the specific sensory contact. The process of work

constantly brings about gaps in the sensory experience of the children and whenever possible the team tries to compensate.

At the same time the children start to create their concept of a stage. They are involved in specialized game-exercises for orientation within the stage environment and feeling its boundaries. Communication with the audience is an important part of the rehearsals – to wait for the reaction of the audience, the intonation of the actors not to influence the mood of the hall (working with visually impaired children proved this to be a high goal due to the avalanche-type passing of emotions through laughter, shouting, stomping, etc.).

In the initial stages of artistic work with the v.i. children, it was exceptionally hard to organise and maintain any kind of movement. Most of the participants are extremely cautious in their body movements. It appears that what we acquire as body culture, we also acquire and feed through visual images. The completeness, aesthetics of the movements, the gesture of details, is foreign to those who are completely blind. It takes enormous effort to move their fingers in order to make them shake their forefinger – a simple gesture for “no” to those who are sighted. During the elaboration of the dancing movements, the children become familiar with the accompanying music, exploring the tempo and rhythm of movements. It is necessary that in the beginning a detailed explanation and assistance for the movements is provided to each child, and the position of the body and limbs should also be explained. At the next stage it is important for the young people to carry out the movements following vocal instructions, which is followed by consolidation and independence.

In the case of more complex movements the example giving is of major importance – that is why the children need to understand the movement by touching. Experience shows as that it is better to start with the hand movements and then continue with the legs. The multiple repetitions accompanied by explanations from the team members are a major factor in the process – this way the children are given a chance to feel the movement more thoroughly and thus master it on their own.

Dancing contributes to the communicative skills and habits, because through it thoughts, feelings, emotions, experiences are being expressed and an understanding of one’s own body is developed, and its possibilities expanded, together with the means for making contact with the others via movements. Both in the classes as well as during extracurricular activities, the aim of dancing exercises is to create and perfect the locomotion and spatial concepts of the children, together with education on developing a sense of beauty. During the process of work the

children study, experiment and develop their concepts about sensing the body, space and motion. The physical feelings are very important because they include concepts for body symmetry and asymmetry, the presence of internal feeling about left and right side, knowing the body parts and their interactions. And last but not least, dancing creates among v.i. children a feeling of completeness and functioning, which is parallel to that of sighted people.

Creating a dance in a group of children is a long process, which gets even more complex when the work is done with visually impaired young people. The emotional and positive attitude during the exercises is important in order for the correct posture, coordination, plasticity and expressiveness of movement to be established in an enjoyable way. The behavior of the children from "Louis Braille" at the beginning was shy, and they were probably worrying about how they were going to be accepted. It is hard for them to start experimenting with their bodies. The process of work on the dances is favorably influenced by the visit of the blind dance Valentina Radzhani. The young people's trust and readiness to learn to dance and express themselves through body language is quickly gained. In order to make even small progress each child needs to be individually and frequently supported, until the movements become routine for him/her. If the exercises are stopped for a certain period of time, the memory for the movement gradually fades away due to the lack of a visual model, which it can feed from. Movement exercises require time, patience and involve trainers supporting each child individually.

An obstacle to the socialisation of v.i. children are stereotyped movements, such as shaking the body and head, swinging with the hand in front of the face, pressing the eyes and others. Some of the children make these movements when they stand still and have nothing to do, others demonstrate them in order to express more emotional forms such as excitement or in more difficult situations – nervousness. What is needed is attention and understanding of the issue, in order for the visually impaired children to be supported in overcoming one of the physical barriers on the way to positive communication. One of the possibilities is to calmly and tactfully encourage the children to stop such movements, for example by placing their hands on their knees or touching and relaxing their backs on their chairs.

V.i. children cannot always notice encouragements with smiles and so vocal encouragement, tapping on the back and shoulders, handshaking and others successfully transmit encouragement. Vocal signs and calling by name are necessary when we need to attract a child's attention. Vocal expressions need to replace nodding, facial expressions or hand signals. When

approaching a child it is wise to state our names – this way it is encouraged to enter into communication with someone outside the close family (or school) circle more calmly.

For successful and thorough communication it is necessary that nonverbal communication, such as expressions and mimics: look, mimics, smile, gesture and body posture, happen with actions: approaching, moving away, passing of objects and others. With the aid of artistic techniques, visually impaired children develop a sense for mimics and gestures, get to know themselves and the others better, establish habits for social interactions, skills to willfully control the expression of their emotions, to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings, to manage and demonstrate their best qualities.

Practical part of the initiative

The process – object of study, comprises of three main stages: a cognitive one (getting to know each other) - end of 2009; a stage with a greater variety of activities and games with partial work on the theatre play “Ali Baba and the forty thieves”, which marks the end of the project (January – March 2010), the third stage of the process is dedicated to the play (March-April 2010). During this time the group changes – the process ends with ten children – four drop out and one joins. The reason behind some of the drop-outs obviously comes from the fact that the average level of the exercises is below their needs (especially from intellectual point of view). Most of these participants fought the dilemma whether to stay or not for quite a long time. The activities are interesting for them, but the group is noisy, sometimes slow with understanding of the tasks, interested in simpler activities and challenges; in other words, the work was focused according to the needs of the 7-9 year old children. The older girls need a different kind of attention from the team with a lot more sharing of specific life experiences. Sometimes they are jealous of the team trying so hard to manage and control the group. The older who decide to stay tend to show childish behavior.

Most of the children in the group have no precise concept about the nature of theatre, stage, and audience, performing before spectators. They have accumulated knowledge mainly from television, movies, mainly series, audio-stories. Some of them have been to theatre plays, but cannot distinct the above mentioned elements; they also have no experience about the nature of rehearsing a play, the feeling during a premiere and the reward from the audience for the talent and dedicated efforts. It is sometimes hard for the team to transmit the message that more rehearsals are needed in order for all details to be refined. Still, with the approach of the

premiere, intuitively absorbing the excitement of the team, the motivation of the group also increases substantially. If several weeks before the premiere the mentioning of work on “Ali Baba” would have only aroused “O, again?!”, at the end of the rehearsal process the participation in the play is a matter of prestige, and the threats to some of them (mostly from school staff, when they are behaving intolerably) or the mere fear that they might not participate, leads to unseen tears.

„Most of the visually impaired children included in the group, come from orphanages or from families with poor social background. Poverty teaches these children to automatically connect the category “Good” with material prosperity. Because of this we considered the approaching process of creation of a theatre play on the one side as a possibility for provoking activities for overcoming deficits – consequences of their physical problems, and on the other side – as a chance for reevaluating the real values in human life.” (Yaneva, 2010, page 108)

Among the most discussed topics with the children is the faith of the heroes in the running TV series, in this particular case – the Turkish production “Pearl” – which is why the team decides to choose an eastern story. The main theme in “Ali Baba and the forty thieves” – for the spiritual and material values, determines the final selection. Since the most moving comments are those related to love, the original text of the story is slightly altered – romanticized. The short time available as well as the specifics of the work with v.i. children requires the size of the story and the number of participants to be reduced.

„Developing a theatre scenario on the basis of a literary piece means to allocate the lines between the various heroes in such a way that the presentation by the actors on stage to be interesting for the audience. On the basis of the scenario the director defines the actions of the actors, which have lead to the verbalization of those lines.” (Yaneva, 2010, page 108) In this particular case, in addition to the listed considerations for the cutting of the story size and intensification of the romantic line, the preparation also requires the actors to express themselves with word and sound, and for the audience to mainly focus on the sound information. This is the reason for the inclusion of a lot of story-telling text, which slightly resembles radio-theatre. Considering the fact that motion results are very slow and hard to achieve, the screenplay envisages only a few of the scenes to be actively played, while others are told or only vaguely mentioned, only for the need to support the logical connection of events.

When defining the scenes, which will be actively played, group tasks are being used, corresponding to the story context, and the children join in all the collective images (salesmen, buyers, thieves, horses, mules, guards, wedding participants).

FACILITATORS AND BIOGRAPHIES

Who ran the project? What roles did they have? *Provide names and short biographies*

Theatre “Flower” allocates the main activities within the project among three basic artistic teams: Violina Vasileva and Yanko Velkov – 28 High school “A. Konstantinov” with integrated children with special education needs, Tsvete Yaneva and Yavor Kostov, frequently supported by Yordanka Andonova, in school for v.i. children “Louis Braille”, Yordanka Andonova and Ekaterina Kazakova in IV School for children with special education needs “Prof. Katsarov”. All three schools are situated in Sofia and volunteers support the work of each team. Supervisors of the activities in school “Louis Braille” are professors Diana Tsirkova and Emilia Evgenieva.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS *(How were the participants selected?)*

The team makes no filtration or division of the group. All children who are interested in joining the group are welcome to do so.

PARTNERS/FUNDERS: *(Did you work with any other organizations? Tell us about them. Were you funded by any organization?)*

No external funding is mentioned. The partners are in fact the schools, where the activities took place.

RESULTS:

Some of the most important results, which appear on the basis of the implementation of certain actions, are the following:

- In the beginning of the meetings the participants are brief when describing their mood – in two or three words or only with a number from 1 to 10. Gradually they become more eloquent and willing to share and they start discussing the reasons behind their feelings and emotions.
 - improved attention and control of emotions achieved particularly by means of music tasks.
- One of the most successful workshops created two groups – one of the groups leaves the room,

while the other needs to create a certain sound pictures – e.g. a farm yard – only using voices, flutes and plastic bottles. When the first group returns it has to guess by sound where it is supposed to be.

- one of the most effective and memorable activities for the children is an exercise in which they are seeds, from which plants grow up – all of them are excited to share exactly what kind of plants they turn out to be and which moment was most pleasurable for them (the majority reply that the most pleasurable time was the moment when they were touching with their leaves – fingers, hands – the leaves of other plants).

- thanks to the exercises the children successfully create a number of previously lacking concepts – e.g. what a snow man is, what a blooming branch is, what a knot is, how the different fruits feel and smell.

- to a considerable extent the children refine their fine motor skills and considerably improve their spatial orientation. The tasks, which consist of moving, orientation, coordination of one's position according to the positioning of the others, are particularly hard for the children. This urges the team to seek every opportunity to motivate the kids to practice. As a result, at the end of the activities, the participants move around in a more secure and confident manner, seeking less and less help from other children or from the team members.

- the group efforts and presentation before an audience motivates the children to be concentrated and to support each other. Their behavior becomes really responsible towards the performance. The play is a platform for self-presentation and the good performance is a tool for building confidence, and consolidation of one's person within a certain social circle.

- the feeling of space (particularly among the completely blind) is complimented by tasks for tempo movement, movement towards sounds. With the aid of the volunteers and the team leaders the children feel through their bodies the movement of a "boat in stormy seas" or a "golf ball". The work on the expressiveness of the body movements is a new skill for the v.i. children.

- one of the hardest games appears to be the conceptualization and imitation of body postures, because a part of the kids are afraid to study the body position of a model in details and thoroughly, they get mixed up in the descriptions – left, right, body parts.

- during the work on the creation of a play, the children struggle to understand the stage space and the size of the decor. In order to develop their sense of the stage and its dimensions, the team members use sound milestones (tissue and sound at one of its ends),

alongside which the participants move, touching it and orienting themselves with the aid of the sound.

- on the basis of the observations it can be concluded that the participation in adventures does not lead to loss of concentration among the kids, on the contrary, it turns into a strong motive for active participation in the work that follows. The new activities amuse the group, while the repetitions are tedious. Broadening the scope of the activities is supported through the initiation of various tasks for creative arts, based on theatrical principles, which, compared to imposed implementation of repeating tasks, positively influences the motivation of the children, enabling quality and sustainability. When their interest is attracted by a new idea, the children are devoted and concentrated in their tasks and there are no discipline issues.

- thanks to the thieves' game and the imitation of attacking movements, the children learn to focus the energy of movement, learn to be confident and straightforward, to balance themselves, shift their weight, etc. Their initial clumsiness in making the movements is quickly overcome and due to their perseverance and repetitions they improve, their swing and the precision of their movements increase.

- despite the spring vacation break, the children demonstrate surprisingly good memories for their tasks on the script. They show good motor memory and with enough repetitions most of the movement elements of the play are quickly restored.

The summary of the results of the artistic work with the group of v.i. children from "Louis Braille" school and the impressions from the sessions, outline the following conclusions:

- With the help of artistic approaches and games the work with v.i. children leads to considerable progress in the development of their motor skills and orientation abilities (sense for stage space and moving within its limits). The children get to know and accept much better their own bodies (sense of left and right side, symmetry of postures, synchronous movements, the posture is improved, confidence on the stage is much better), they learn how to express themselves through theatrical instruments (dance, ritual games such as sword play, turning in circles around one's own vertical body axis), how to master gestures and mimics, which come more naturally to sighted people (the "no" gesture with the forefinger, a bow).

- As far as memory is concerned, the children, even those with greatest concentration troubles, demonstrate remarkable ability to memorize the lines, which shape up the final play.
- The sensory experience and concepts for various elements of the world are greatly enriched through touching, studying and smelling of fruits and materials (yarn, vale, styrofoam, plastic, stone, wood, earth, etc.), a car, a cassette-player, musical instruments, theatre costumes. Concepts about seasons, plants and their development, about the various elements that form the surrounding objects are explored and broadened.
- The children's speech becomes more articulate, more expressive; the quieter and shier ones start speaking louder and in a more confident manner, which is noticed by everyone during the last sessions and the performance itself. On the other hand, those who were shouting and trying to out-speak the others made progress by trying to control such impulses. The strong momentary excitement was harnessed and this energy was redirected by the participants themselves towards the implementation of performance-related tasks: they gradually started to treat each other with respect and treat their roles in the play with responsibility, as well as collaborating for the common tasks of the group (a major factor in the process are the team games and the collective adventures).
- An important factor in the work process is the will of the team to encourage the children's confidence, the striving focus towards the achievement of an end product, which presents the abilities and new skills developed by all participants. The improvement of self-assessment by the participants is supported and demanded by the team leaders and the volunteers, as well by as the satisfaction from the participation in the play and the approving and encouraging reaction of the audience.
- Among the objectives of the project is also the creation of conditions for the children to communicate more successfully with their sighted peers. This proves to be hard to accomplish because of certain considerations of the management of the school, which do not allow for taking the children outside of school. Despite this the children implement successful social contacts through their communication with the volunteers. With time, they start to feel more secure and better accepted; they start initiating communication, which obviously pleases them.

OUTCOMES: *(What were the outcomes? What changed as a result of the project?)*

- **For the participants** – improved expression skills, improved attention, ability to concentrate, group work; the artistic performance greatly raised the confidence and self-evaluation; progress in the coordination of movements, mastering new motor skills;
- **For the facilitators** – we will quote the conclusion written by the graduate Sirma Kostadinova, who participated in the project as a volunteer:

“In the end I will go back to a personal experience during the training for volunteers under the project. One of the games organized within it consisted of the following: the eyes of all the volunteers, except one leading the group, are bound tightly with scarves so that nothing can be seen. We all grab hands and the first one leads the line of the group outside the building where the training is taking place. We all started up on a path, then we climbed some stairs, then we all release the clasp and are instructed to run on our own until a certain sound-marked place is reached.

During the exercise I felt certain main feelings: first, a feeling of utter insecurity, I cannot control the movements of my body – they are extremely and unnaturally insecure, as if I never walked, not to mention running, which is even harder (the feeling is as if I am fighting an insurmountable barrier, which numbs my movements). Second, I realise how important it is in that particular moment to trust – to trust the person who leads the group, the person walking ahead of me, the person following me, to let go of the effort to know where I am being led, what lies ahead, what our road goes through, to trust the sound I am running to. And third, I am learning. I am learning that I can quickly get to know the environment, by directing the attention towards all my other senses – I can clearly feel the stony path under our feet, I can sense the light breeze of the wind, I can hear my steps and those of the others, I can even hear my breathing, I am holding hands with the people around me and I can sense their excitement.

On this day I probably start to understand better the visually impaired people and the way in which they experience the world. The exercise helped me to be more effective as a volunteer, to wish very strongly to be helpful to the kids participating in the project, **with the conviction**

that through trust and with the help of artistic approaches we can together rediscover the world, feel it with the senses of the other.”

- **For the organisation** – the project confirmed the conviction that artistic approaches from theatre can considerably improve the development of children and youths with visual impairment.

EVALUATION METHODS: *(How did you evaluate the project? How did you know you met your aims? How did you measure success? What systems did you use?)*

The volunteers observed the children during every session and their behavior was presented and analyzed in short structured reports. The progress made by the children is obvious and is presented both in the results section above as well as in the considerations for the V.I.S.I.ON project underneath.

EVIDENCE: *(What evidence do you have to show that your aims were met? Statistics, anecdotes, date, photographs, film, etc.)*

Each session has a description of the reactions and behavior of each participant – evaluation of individual involvement of the children in each session. There is also photographic material from all the meetings.

DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW: *(What did you learn from the project? What impact has this project had on your practice?)*

Check outcomes!

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: *(What guided what you did and how you worked? What did you think about in order to make this best practice? Theory, policies, approaches, expert advice etc)*

Theatre and artistic techniques present an enormous field for expression of this force, they lead us to breaking the boundaries of everyday images, to enter a world of endless possibilities, in which we can decide what to be and how to surprise ourselves and others. We are being carried by the confidence that we can be different according to our wish, that we can amuse others, be interesting, funny, scary, unpredictable, bad, smart or silly. The stage

gives us strength to say things that we would otherwise not verbalize in everyday conversation, to find new means of expressing ourselves and increase our self-evaluation.

Theatre in itself combines several art forms – music, dance, scenography, by which it enriches and broadens the circle of activities and skills, connected with its creation. The music techniques help the participants to master the rhythm, to synchronize and to listen to others, and discover a new way for nonverbal expression of feelings. Dancing broadens the possibilities of the body and the sense for symmetry. The participants experience a feeling of lightness or boldness, sharpness, and communication takes place with the other participants, through our movements. All of this is taking place among a magical environment of decors and costumes.

For the v.i. participant or guest the sensing of the magic that is taking place on stage is passed through music, movements, sounds, variety of the costume tissues and objects, lines and the strength of their emotions.

It is known that approximately 80% of the information we receive every day comes through vision. Thanks to their vision babies learn to recognize people and objects from their surrounding, they are attracted to research what surrounds them. Vision helps the children to study the world around them: how to ride a bike, how to bake cookies, how to make mimics that transmit emotions and moods, they understand how the buildings are constructed, etc. In their everyday life children use their vision to study and imitate the activities they see the adults doing: the process is known as incident learning. At school the kids often need to experience comparisons, scientific demonstration, computer presentation as well as everything that is written on the blackboard in addition to their ability to read texts. Children who have issues reading or have a visual impairment need additional materials by means of tactile and alternative materials, in order to successfully expand their capacities.

Even though v.i. young people can learn and do most of the activities just as well as their sighted peers, they at times need focused training in the mastering of knowledge and skills, which sighted young people comprehend immediately. Visual impairments often influence the development of concepts, the ability to move, to orient oneself in space, the abstract learning, peer relations, self-evaluation, as well as the access to many elements from the school life, professional sphere and entertainment, which sighted people take for granted. V.i. children often have various talents, which can be developed with support from a third party through training that uses various sensory models. It is necessary that an array of teaching methods,

used for enriching the abilities to learn in all spheres of life is used and from as early a point in life as possible.

The functions, which are important conditions for normal vision are:

- Sharpness of vision: the ability of the eyes to see separately two lighted points positioned at a minimum distance one from the other.
- Vision field: the part of space, which the eye absorbs when fixating on one point.
- Binocular vision: the ability of both eyes to see one object at the same time and join their perceptions in one.
- Accommodation: an adaptive mechanism of the eye, which allows it to maintain clear image of objects positioned at different distances from it.

There are two types of visual impairments:

- Blindness: a condition, under which there are no visual perceptions or there are only insignificant perceptions of light. The blindness can be absolute (total) or partial.
- Poor vision: a condition under which the various levels of lack of vision sharpness do not allow it to absorb fine details from all distances, even with optical correction.

The time when a child or young person lost their vision or their vision became impaired is of major importance. In accordance with this indicator, young people are divided into two groups – early blindness or later blindness. The time limit is placed according to the development of speech and the accumulation of visual concepts, preserved to a certain extent into the visual images of memory. The earlier the visual impairments appear, the more serious the deviations in the nervous and psychological development:

- Early loss of vision: the loss of vision is congenital or appeared when the child was younger than 1 year. These children have no preserved visual concepts and images of the surrounding world in their memory.
- Later loss of vision: the impairment appears after the child is 2 years old. The memory preserves visual images. They are preserved at different depths and there is a tendency for their gradual disappearance. The preserved images are a valuable ground for correctional approaches and for the later cognitive development, especially of their reasoning abilities.

The visual impairments are congenital or acquired and depending on the visual sharpness the following groups can be outlined:

1. Totally blind: their visual blindness is 0; the children have no visual perceptions.
2. Children with perception of light: they have a vision from 0 to 0,01. They can define dark from light, day from night and can sense movement of the hand in front of the eyes. Children with perception of light can feel movement from light to dark, they can sense when a shaft of light penetrates a dark room, but they cannot make out objects in the room by using their vision.
3. Partial vision: visual sharpness within the range 0,01 to 0,04 of the eye that sees better. The children from this group in Bulgaria are defined as children with “residual vision” or with „useful vision”. They can make out colors, contours and silhouettes, they can move freely in a familiar environment, so recognize objects from short distances, to read large advertisements and news paper titles. At the same time these children cannot differentiate faces and together with the previous two groups use Braille as a main tool for education.
4. Weak sighted: the largest group visually impaired children. Their vision varies between 0,05 and 0,2. The children are able to make the difference between colors, they can orient themselves and move around better than the others, they recognize faces from short distances and are the only group, which can be taught by using large print.
5. Children with sharpness of vision higher than 0,2. they can also be subjects to special education if they have an impairment of other visual functions: for example very narrow visual field, very damaged color differentiation or an eye disease such as malignant near-sightedness, degeneration of the retina or glaucoma. All these circumstances can lead to progressive loss of vision.

A number of visually impaired children also have multiple disabilities. Visually impaired with multiple disabilities are those children whose vision varies between 0 and 0,2 of the better eye and they have at least one more disability – mental, physical, sensory or emotion with various gravity. (Lefterova-Gadzhlova, 2002, Malinovskaya, 2001, Solntseva, 2006, The Encyclopedia of Blindness and Vision Impairment, 2002).

As a whole the development of v.i. children progresses similarly to the development of sighted children, but problems arise from the relative mental difficulties of the formation and development of the psycho-motor sphere. In connection with that the following specifics of

psycho-motor development, conceptualization, reasoning, speech, memory and emotional experiences of children with visual impairment can be outlined.

Psycho-motor development.

The inclusion of v.i. children (particularly those who lose their sight early) influences quite favorably their compensatory skills. The participation in games and later on in learning and work actions increases their activity, motivation, stabilizes the sensitivity of the preserved and of the damaged sensory systems, has a positive effect on the development of sophisticated psychological functions (memory, reasoning, comprehension, speech). The early involvement of the children in cognitive activities contributes to correction and compensation of damaged functions.

The lack of vision means the child cannot learn through imitation, which is extremely important at early childhood, when most of the skills and habits are mastered and knowledge is accumulated mainly through imitation. The visually impaired child often develops seemingly useless physical activities, also called stereotypes (or blindism), which represent involuntary stimulation: swinging with fingers before the eyes, in order to see movement of light and darkness, other motions with the hands and fingers, swaying of the body and others.

Concepts.

Visual impairments limit, harden or completely exclude the possibility for visual perception, which inevitably affects the formation of concepts. The visual concepts can be partially compensated thanks to the actions of preserved senses, i.e. by increasing the number of other concepts.

V.i. children show difficulties in forming spatial concepts, which influences their orientation in the environment and their mobility. Concepts related to time are built as a rule much more precisely and correctly compared to those related to space. The formation of concepts among v.i. children is not as easy and natural as it is for children with sight. As a consequence of the visual impairment, children form a concept about the surrounding world via their tactile perceptions and on the basis of descriptions provided by sighted people around them. The tactile perceptions however do not possess the power of the visual perceptions. A specific issue arises when trying to form concepts about objects and events, which are very big, very small, fragile and easy to break, hard to check via tactile means, distant ones. Verbal explanation

cannot guarantee thoroughness and clarity of a concept created by it. Basically, all concepts that need visual grounds are formed slowly and in a hard way, e.g. concepts of colors.

Attention.

For children with limited vision it is hard to focus and allocate their attention. Deviations concerning conceptualization influence negatively the size, refocusing and maintaining of attention. In the process of work it is possible for the children to lose their focus and to become tired after being exposed to longer sound stimuli, concentration is broken.

Memory.

Memory as an aggregation of processes of retaining and forgetting, learning and recreating represents a necessary condition for human actions. The development of memory is directly related to the progress of society, which constantly requires complication of the functions of memory.

The slowing of memorizing development processes among v.i. children is due to insufficient visual-effective experience, increased tiredness, and lack of sophisticated methods for work with v.i. children in this direction. It is thought that the insufficient volume, the lower speed as well as other particularities of memorizing have a secondary character, i.e. are not due to the visual impairment itself, but appear as a consequence of the deviations in the psychological development. The early correction of brain activities prevents such deviations. It is important keep in mind the individual characteristics of the child, his or her age and the nature of the visual impairment.

The type of memory depends on the dominating character of the activity and the content of the material. Involving v.i. children in diversified activities and exercising the undamaged senses, in some cases also of residual vision, represents a stimulus and condition for development of memory.

Reasoning.

Reasoning is in direct relation to the senses, to the quality and quantity of data, which is absorbed through them.

With children who are visually impaired the process of analysis, synthesis, classification, abstraction and generalization are distressed. They compare the objects by using unsubstantial characteristics.

Due to missing or limited visual perceptions these children form irregular concepts about objects and get to know their nature and properties incompletely. Significant hardships arise when making special connections and understanding the relationships between objects. Abstract thinking has no sound basis in certain concepts and experiences, as a result of which the speech-logic thinking surpasses the visual-objective reasoning of v.i. children.

Speech.

V.i. children start speaking with a delay because the articulation abilities of humans are developed not only on the basis of speech-auditory images, but also through visual images – the movements of the lips of those who speak. It is possible for v.i. children to express certain deviations in their pronunciation, also there can be a change in the tempo and strength of the voice – very loud or very quiet, and stuttering is also frequent.

For children with visual impairments it is hard to master the use of mimics, gestures, intonation and other nonverbal communication means. In her book „The unconscious body image“ Françoise Dolto writes: “the affective mimics of the blind have as touching authenticity of those of babies prior to the mirror experience. They never hide what they feel and everything they feel when meeting someone can be read on their faces.” (Dolto, 1984, page 132)

Emotional and volitional field.

Emotions and feelings as a specific reflection of the outer world, presented in the subjective attitude of a person towards reality, depend on how thoroughly, precisely and exhaustively the environment has been reflected.

Quite often the negative emotions of the lack of emotional attitude of v.i. children upon encounters with certain objects can be explained by the lack of satisfaction of their learning needs, or in other cases, the lack of need for studying the object. At the same time, other objects, which usually evoke no emotions from the sighted people, are a cause for strong emotional experiences for the visually impaired.

During contact with a wider circle of unknown sighted people, it is possible to observe discomfort or urge for avoiding direct interaction (lower self-esteem and minority complex), or

emotional resistance, taking the form of hostility and animosity towards the others (lack of desire to be considered physically and socially inadequate by the sighted people). Difficulties in orientation in space, for example can be a cause for uncertainty and frustration.

The observed deviations in moral and intellectual feelings (lack of sense of duty, for cooperation, lack of sense of humor, selfishness etc.) can also be noticed among sighted children and the reason for them should not be directly related to the visual impairment. Often they are the result of a child's upbringing, as well as relations in the family or school environment (reproaches, mockery, neglect, comparing with other family members, underestimating abilities). (Litvak, 1998, pages 251-268)

The harmonious development of feeling, as well as that of the v.i. kids' can be achieved through their involvement and their active participation in games and various educational and creative activities (whether they are taught in a specialized or general education establishment), also through encouraging faith in their own skills and talents.

In the beginning of their adolescence (11-14 years) visually impaired children demonstrate a considerable progress in their cognitive abilities. During that period, if some cognitive difficulties have been observed, the children can catch up with their sighted peers to a great extent.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR V.I.S.I.ON: *(How might this project inform your approach to the V.I.S.I.ON project and your work with visually impaired young people?)*

We can point the following fixations/exercises/actions as such, which could be valuable and interesting for V.I.S.I.ON:

- assessment, both at the beginning as well as after each session, of the individual mood in the moment, e.g. using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is bad and 10 is wonderful;
- the use of musical tasks requiring the team to be patient and the children to be constantly motivated. The observations from the quoted good practice show that participating children demonstrate considerable interest towards new sources of sound. Thanks to the musical tasks their attention is preserved for longer periods and the impulse for strong hitting of the instruments in order to dominate the group via sound becomes gradually unnecessary. Sound enriches the sensory experiences of art and contributes to the communication of concepts to the v.i. children. By combining motion and sound theatre increases expression through movement, the sensory experience and the emotional reaction of the group.

- it brings great pleasure for the children to express themselves through matter – in one session they created a storm at sea by means of waving a large veil held by everyone.

- v.i. children often miss concepts for things and objects, which are taken for granted by sighted people – for example a snow-man or how the tree branches blossom in spring – which means that the team's exercises with v.i. children should make as great an effort to fill in these blanks as possible, via sensory activities.

- exercises for fine motor skills are useful, as well as those for spatial orientation and collaboration – in one of the sessions the children are asked to write a letter to Santa Claus and to prepare it for sending in an envelope. Then they are divided into two groups and are asked to walk against each other and when meeting each person had to find a young person from the other group, with which to exchange letters.

When the time of the performance before the audience comes, the children wait for the guests to be seated in a circle. Their faces show excitement, uneasiness – with some it is less noticeable than with others, where nervousness and shame can be noticed. During the performance the children are focused and support each other. Their behavior shows a great level of responsibility towards what they are doing, which contrasts their behavior during rehearsals. They are probably motivated by the presence of their fellow students, friends and teachers – the theatre play is a kind of self-manifestation and their good performance is an instrument, which can help them build their confidence, self-respect and consolidation of their role in their social circle.

- for the purpose of developing a sense of space (especially for the completely blind) it is useful to enforce tasks for group movement, movement towards sound;

- it can be difficult for children to imitate body postures, because some of the participants are afraid to study the body positions in details, and so more efforts are needed on behalf of the team. They also get mixed up in the descriptions – left, right, body parts.

- special efforts are needed to build concepts about the dimensions of the décor and the space of the stage, because it becomes clear that such are missing entirely for a part of the group.

- stories really intrigue the participants, they listened with great attention and express their empathy towards the characters.

- sound expressions please them most, while gestures can be missed

- participation in adventures does not defocus them, on the contrary, it acts as a strong

motive for active involvement of follow up activities. It is useful for the children to be engaged in new tasks, because this maintains their interest and enthusiasm. They exhaust some of their emotional energy during the games prior to the real rehearsal and can then work more focused for the implementation of different artistic tasks. The allocation of time between the various activities needs to be done very carefully because if the children are too engaged physically or emotionally during the preliminary activities, they are not sufficiently focused during the rehearsals.

- it should never be forgotten that the children love to break the rules of the games – this is their way to distinguish themselves, to express themselves, to rebel. They do it consciously and openly. The older ones even imitate the younger ones and shout.

- movement exercises are really useful and the team should not be discouraged by clumsiness in the beginning. With the help of enough repetitions and perseverance they refine their motions and the swing and the precision of movements increases.

- family-related conversations often cause painful emotions among the children, but they are also valuable, because they manage to identify each other as members of their “school” families, taking care of each other.

- when working in smaller groups, the children control their emotions better and demonstrate greater attention and focus when doing their tasks.

Bibliography:

- Graduation topic for master degree: “Artistic techniques for use in work with visually impaired children – specifics and practice – master’s thesis of graduate: Sirma Veselinova Kostadinova with scientific supervisor: prof. Diana Tsirkova, 2013r.
- Françoise Dolto, „L'image inconsciente du corps”, éd. du Seuil, Paris, 1984,
- Lefterova-Gardzhalova D., „Current problems of special education”, P. 2002
- Litvak A. G. “Psychology of the blind and partially sighted”, Petersburg, 1998
- Malinovskaya N. D. “Psychology of the development of the blind and the visually impaired” biomedical journal, June 2001, page 141-143

- Solntseva L. I. "Psychology of children with visual impairment (child tiflopedagogy), M. 2006
- Theater "Flower", compiler Yaneva, compilation "Our experience. Art-techniques for work with children with special education needs", S. 2010
- The Encyclopedia of Blindness and Vision Impairment, Shelly S., Richard A., Rutzen M.D., Sardegna J., Scott M., Steidl M.D., 2002