



# NATIONAL REPORT ON SERVICES ABOUT VISUALLY IMPAIRED PAOPLE IN LUXEMBOURG

## SOCIETÀ DANTE ALIGHIERI: AIMS AND SCOPE THEATRE WORKSHOPS FOR CHILDREN AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN SCHOOLS IN LUXEMBOURG PROPOSALS

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## THEATRE AS ART THERAPY: A TOOL FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AS WELL AS FOR SELF AWARENESS AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED PAOPLE

### EXEMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

### What is Società Dante Aligheri

The Dante Alighieri Society is an association for the study and dissemination of the Italian language and culture. It was born in Italy in 1889.

It makes use of national committees in the country and about 400 foreign committees around the world. The Dante Luxembourg Committee was created in the 80's and after a decade of intense activity has slowed down its events until 2013, when the old committee was formally dissolved and it was decided to establish a new one.

The challenges presented to the new Dante committee are quite different from those faced by the previous one. Meanwhile, the multicultural Grand Duchy of Luxembourg has been further enhanced with new foreign presence thanks to the integration of the new member states of Eastern Europe and to a fairly significant presence of expats from around the world. Moreover, in recent years the Italian presence in the Grand Duchy has increased considerably and the type of immigrants has also changed. Beside well-educated immigrants who leave their country for better pay and conditions – who usually work in banks and in the European institutions - are now coming less educated young people seeking work much less prestigious than their countrymen until a few years ago.

### Our aim

Currently the Società Dante has for objective, in addition to the aforementioned dissemination of the Italian language and culture, to act as a bridge between the Italian community, the country of Luxembourg and the wider international expats community. This is done by numerous cultural events including artistic "aperitivo", cultural meetings between the Italian community and other foreign communities, tours, exhibitions, etc. ...

We can affirm that intercultural communication is at the core of our activity. In our role as promoters of intercultural competence we set ourselves the objective of understanding and strengthen the different cultural identities of the singular nationalities that make up the varied landscape of Luxembourg.

Communication should also be seen as a tool that allows people not only to break down barriers of language, nationality and culture, but also handicap as that of blindness, for example. Being able to communicate effectively with those who are visually impaired, and above all, being able to help a visually impaired to communicate with the rest of the world is a big and exciting challenge that our association has been very happy to accommodate.



As we know communication is both verbal and non-verbal, and what we communicate with our body and with facial expressions is sometimes more important than the words used. For the visually impaired, who for example, do not see the encouraging smile in the faces of the people around them, nor their gestures, socialization becomes much more difficult and risky. In sensitive people this can lead to a closure in themselves and a failure to build self-esteem for what concerns social relations.

Lately, much has been done for the social integration of the visually impaired. Modern portable devices also allow them to read, communicate, stay informed and in this way participate in working life independently. The last frontier is constituted by an interest in the social sphere, considered so important that the prestigious MIT in Boston has launched a project for the social inclusion of the blind, thanks to the new opportunities of scientific research.

### **Theatre workshops for children and visually impaired children**

Theatrical experience conducted in groups of blind people has proved a successful tool for greater interaction and more effective decoding of the surrounding world.

Usually foreign Dante Alighieri committees offer Italian language courses for children (and of course for adults) and we are no exception. In addition to these, our committee proposes a wide range of courses for children like for example art, choir, cooking classes and theatre.

A particularly positive impact has had the latter form of artistic expression. We were able to assess its effects on the personality of children in a relatively short time. After theatrical training participants were much more at ease with themselves and with others, more ready to leave their comfort zone and experiment without fear, and better able to express their emotions in an articulate and socially acceptable way. We firmly believe that, as we observed in the case studies, this training tool should also be provided to visually impaired children, so as to achieve the same positive results, even more important in their case to break down the last barriers to full and complete social inclusion.

### **Schools in Luxembourg**

Currently in Luxembourg city 60% of the population is foreign-born. The national languages are three: Luxembourgish, French and German. But the languages spoken in the small but cosmopolitan capital are many more. The European School offers 15 language sections, plus SWALS (sections without a language section) whose pupils receive just some hours of weekly teaching in their mother tongues.

The school-age children who arrive in Luxembourg from abroad have the opportunity to study at the Luxembourgish school (public or private), the two European schools, the two French schools or at the International school.



This information is not listed for illustrative purposes, but because its knowledge is essential in order to understand such a particular country like Luxembourg and to accordingly adapt the project VISION to the peculiarities of the place.

In Luxembourg do not exist, unlike what happens in other European countries, specialized centres for teaching the visually impaired. These children are integrated in regular schools on the national territory. The “Institut pour defectives visuels” is responsible for coordinating the inclusion of these children in different schools in Luxembourg. The other schools (European School, French schools, etc...) adopt at their discretion special programs for the inclusion of visually impaired children in their classes.

Following the analysis of these data, we believe that we cannot count on the collaboration with only one organization in Luxembourg. This will involve a number of logistical and organizational difficulties that we will have to face.

Secondly, we must pay great attention to the scheduling of meetings, taking into account the school holidays that sometimes do not coincide for all schools. In particular, there are several dates of start and end of the school year with a decalage greater than 3 weeks between Luxemburgish school that ends in mid-July and starts in mid-September and ISL that ends in late June and begins in late August.

Throughout the school year as in other European countries (but unlike Italy) there are a lot of school terms, on average one week per month. During the holidays the city of Luxembourg is depopulated, either because foreigners tend to return to their place of residence, or because the highest per capita income allows people to make more travels throughout the year.

## Proposals

It's important to take account of the data listed above in order to formulate the right proposal to the schools in view of a theatre workshop for children.

We propose to offer schools a course of theatrical expression for visually impaired children articulated in about 20 sessions of 2 hours each, on Tuesday or Thursday afternoon (short days in Luxembourg), about every two weeks. The course is expected to start in January 2015 and finish in June 2016 with the week-long internship at the Teatro Finocchiaro of Palermo (on the occasion of the holiday of Pentecost, which are from Saturday, May 14 to Sunday, May 22, 2016).

Theme of our course could be the representation of a story that takes elements from European intercultural popular folklore from the five European countries participating in the project. The theme could be “conflict and interconnection”.

In this regard, see the experience of Maria Oshodi, Director of Extant, about the physical representation of the conflict in a group of visually impaired actors, implemented by dividing the players into two groups, each of which played the rhythm instruments at a different pace, moving in opposite directions.



The players could receive an outline of the story, that then they would complete, to give them the idea of "owning" the performance.

It would be very interesting also to introduce to them e some visually impaired actor to serve as a role model and an inspiration to the kids, to show them that most difficulties can be overcome.

## DEFINITIONS OF DIFFERENT VISUAL DEFICITS

### Blindness

In the field of rehabilitation, the blind person is the one who uses the different sensorial modalities with the exception of the view to perceive and process the information in the various situations of life. The presence of any bright perceptions can be used in a functional manner.

### Visual impairment/low vision

The definitions of "visual impairment" only take into account the values of 2 visual functional tests: the power of fine discrimination of the eye to the maximum contrast (visual acuity) and the visual field. In any case these definitions do not take into account the functional vision, defined as the usable vision in practice, much wider than the simple determination of visual acuity. The work in Low Vision will therefore be based on the concepts of various handicaps, as they have been defined according to the International Classification of Disabilities proposed by Wood in 1980, in which 4 concepts are listed: disease, impairment, disability and disadvantage. In the document there is a wide variety of definitions and descriptions of the low vision and persons with a visual impairment. The definitions vary depending on the country and the reader should be remembered that there is no universal definition of low vision.

The many attempts to define low vision are based on clinical measures which, as in the case of the definition of legal blindness, does not give a complete picture of the degree of vision of an individual or the way in which he works with his residual vision.

The World Health Organization (WHO 1992) describes a person with a low vision as "someone who has a visual impairment functional even after processing and/or an optical correction standard, and which has a visual acuity less than 6/18 (the metric equivalent of 20/70] to the light perception, or who has a visual field residual less than 10° of the fixation point, but who uses or is potentially able to use this vision to



plan and/or perform a task for which the vision is essential. "According to the WHO, there are 5 levels of visual loss ranging from the low vision at 20/70 in the absence of light perception (Whitcher 2008).

In practice, a person with a low-vision is someone who cannot read printed characters and/or move in unknown locations, despite a treatment and/or a functional optical correction. This visual impairment has an impact on everyday habits and life.

## **THE CHILD'S VISION**

In the new born between 0-3 months we observe a development of eye movements, visual contact, a social smile as well as a visual pursuit. Towards 4-6 months, he will be able to observe the hands in the center of the visual field, to produce a careful observation, recognize distant objects. Later on, when the child reaches the age of 7-10 months, the presence of a peripheral vision symmetrical can be observed, the child notes the bread crumbs, he is capable of grasping objects to handle.

Towards the age of one or two years, he recognizes the people by far, is interested in the books and in the images; on the other hand, it won't be before 3-4 years that he will name the images and symbols of the tests, near and remote, showing a symmetrical visual acuity.

At 5-6 years the child will present a similar vision to that of an adult, but he has difficulty with dense visual information.

## **What happens when the child is visual impaired?**

Very quickly its performance and behavior have a few differences compared to an expected "normality". His first smile appears later, because the mother's or relatives' face perception turns to be more difficult. If they are not trying to capture its visual attention, it tends to prefer the other sensory information (hearing, smell, touch etc.). In order to cross the same steps as a child with a good vision and to discover his surrounding world, it takes more time to a visually impaired child, because it must discover different tools to manage his body in space. Moreover it will need different motivation to move through the stages of motor and cognitive development.

## **SERVICES IN LUXEMBOURG**

### **The Institute for Visually Impaired (IDV)**



Created in 1975, the Institute for the Visually Impaired is a state institution within the context of differentiated education, dependent on the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training and Sports. As a State institution, the IDV offers free services.

THE IDV organizes, in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport, school transportation for the pupils who attend the courses in its institution.

THE IDV counts several branches throughout the territory of the Grand Duchy. According to our research, the different schools provide students several courses of art-therapy such as the plastic arts, carpentry, music, singing. Up to the present, we have not been able to identify training courses on theater for blind or visually impaired in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

## **ART THERAPY**

Art Therapy uses art-making materials and techniques to facilitate the process through which a person is able to develop or enhance the sense of self. It is based on the belief that the creative process mirrors the self, and is healing and life-enhancing. Through the process of art making with an art therapist, one can increase self-awareness, cope with stress and traumatic experiences, develop motor skills, and enhance cognitive abilities.

## **Art therapy in children with disabilities**

In cases of children with disabilities, it is not uncommon that the individual never had the chance to develop a clear sense of self, or he or she may have difficulty differentiating him or herself from the environment.

The failure to distinguish oneself from the environment is common in children with disabilities, and especially with children who are blind, because the self-development process involves a significant amount of very early interaction with caregivers, interaction that is disrupted by the disability.

A blind child raised by very loving caretakers can exhibit the same signs of social non-integration as a child raised without human interaction.

## **GOOD PRACTICE IN FRENCH LANGUAGE**

In Nice (France), a visually impaired woman, Mrs Parola, created an amateur theater in Nice for visually impaired.





As she became blind herself, Mrs. Parola presides nowadays the Union of blinds of Nice and the Alpes-Maritimes and Corsica (UACN), which offers to its members weekly theater courses conducted by a theater teacher. Its objective is to propose to the members to try to make progress in the diction and the gestures, to step on the stage and face the public. An action that has led his group to propose a creative humoristic show, with known texts and sketches, in front of a crowded room with a delighted public. Without complex or contention, simply to please themselves the other, but by working seriously with a theater professor, Isabelle Warnart.

She developed her "tricks", by placing for example a mat in the entry of the scene to alert her comedians, using a rope of the length of the distance they have to walk, by gluing a piece of carpet recognizable at the foot to mark the position of the actor. And she leaves her comedians use their guide dog on stage or their white cane, assuming these elements being part of the personality of the blind. The professor leaves great freedom. She is also doing a warm up and the physical training.

This entertainment activity already counts four years of existence.

"The theater experience brings self-confidence, since there is a tendency to be excluded, or to be put in a quiet corner," concludes Valerie Parola.

## **GOOD PRACTICE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

In London, UK, the group Extant organizes a variety of activities for visually impaired people. Next to writing, dance, outdoor activities, we finally find theater experience. A group of professional visually impaired artists pioneered theater practice with the express inclusion of visually impaired performers and audiences. The outcome of these experiences brought the participants to express their positive opinion on them, declaring that theatre helped them to accept their disability and contributed to a more efficient use of mobility aids.

Stage performance also facilitates social contact, helping people to get out from their isolation, thus confirming the outcomes emerged by the French activity mentioned above.

## **GOOD PRACTICE IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE**

In Portici, Italy, the local theater group of the Unione Italia Ciechi e Ipovedenti (Italian union for visually impaired) annually offers a theater performance with visually impaired actors. Guided by the parent of one young actor, they manage to bring on stage all the dynamism and the humor of the comedies they



present. The revenue is entirely devoted to the acquisition of new learning material for visually impaired children.

A one-time experience promoted by the professional actor, Tiziana Sensi, who started a project that ended up with a theater play where more than half of the actors were blind. She encouraged the visually impaired actors to overcome their body stiffness and their facial inexpressivity by assimilating expressions and gestures they could learn to discover by touching other people's faces.



Erasmus+

#### SITE REFERENCE LIST

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